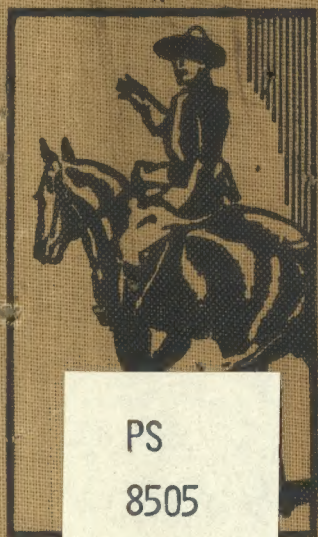


**THE
PILOT OF
INDIAN
LEAP**

**JAMES
CAHILL**



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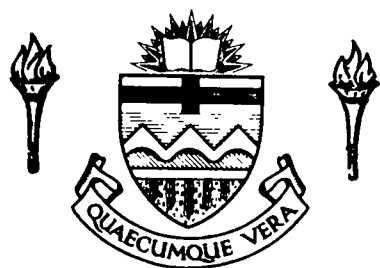
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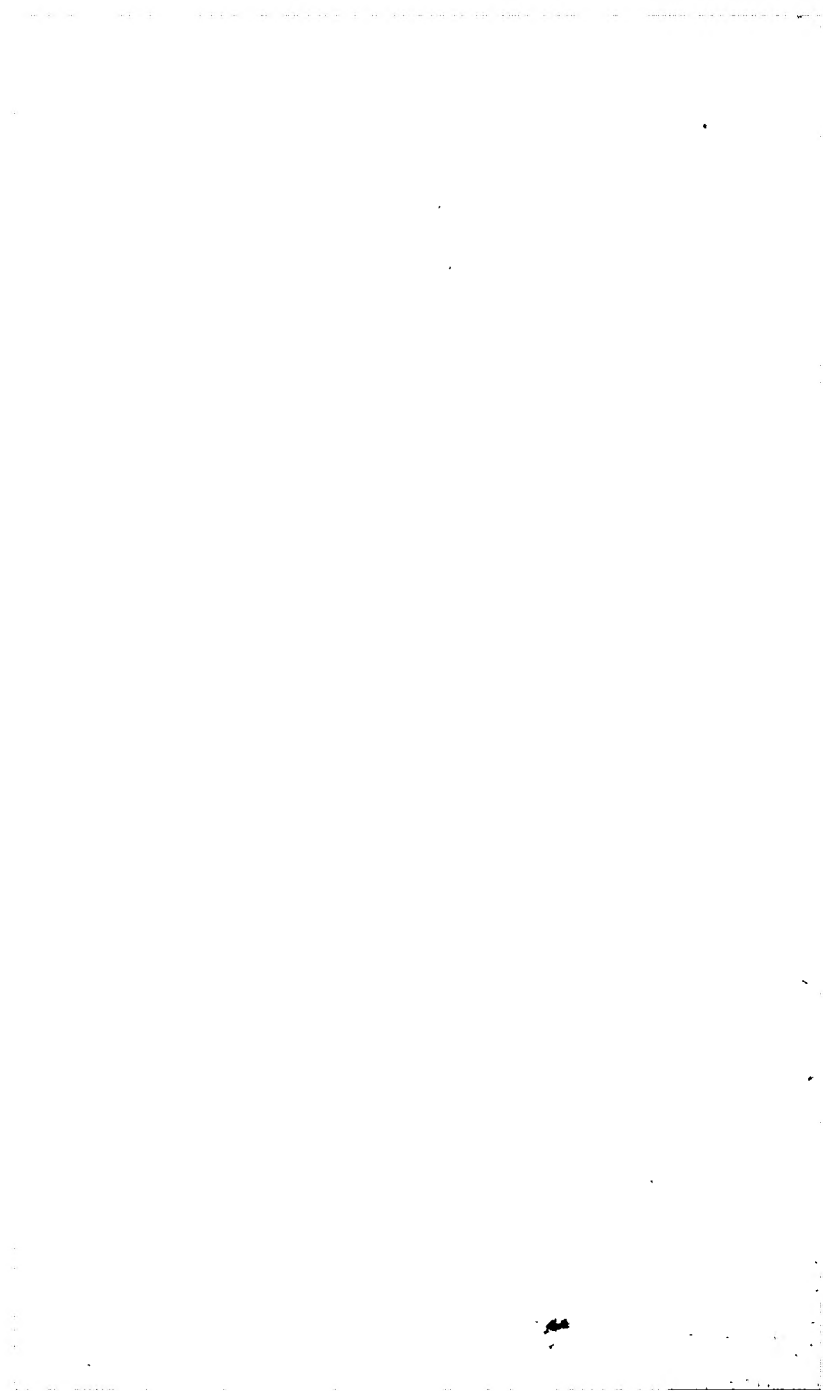
**THE PILOT OF
INDIAN LEAP**

**JAMES
CAHILL**



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THE PILOT OF
INDIAN LEAP

THE PILOT OF INDIAN LEAP

By
JAMES CAHILL

Illustrations by
LEWIS LUPTON



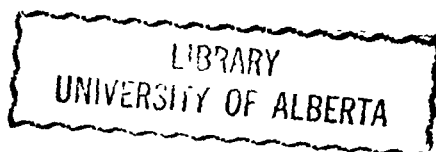
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A landing at Indian Leap

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CHAPTER I

NICK LESTER

'WHAT you need, Nick,' said Mortimer Lester to his son, 'is a good, long holiday before going up to Cambridge.'

Nick, perched gaily on the stile against which his father was leaning, looked rather startled, and pulled off his flying helmet to rub the back of his head reflectively, a habit he had when perplexed.

'I don't see why you say that, Dad,' he replied slowly. 'After all, we've only just got back from Switzerland.'

'That wasn't a holiday—that was taking Lou over to her new school. Can't call that a holiday.'

'Are you going to accuse me of working too hard at school, or something?' demanded the boy.

'Far from it!' said his father hastily. 'But wouldn't you like a few more months' flying before settling down to real hard work this time?'

'Sure!' grinned Nick at once. 'But there'll be flying at Cambridge, you know. However, I'd like to hop over for the International Air Rally at Munich, if you don't mind.'

'I was thinking of rather farther afield,' said his father slowly. 'In fact—Canada.'

'Canada? But why Canada?'

'Well, I thought you might like to look up your Uncle Nicholas, for one thing. And—er—it would broaden your outlook, and all that sort of thing, wouldn't it?'

'Could I take the plane?'

'Of course.'

'It sounds pretty good, Dad,' said the boy. 'Are you thinking of going too?'

'Er—no. Not this time. Well, your engine will be warmed up sufficiently by now. Think it over, Nick.'

Mortimer Lester walked slowly back through the gardens towards the house, and his son went no less slowly towards his aeroplane, thinking deeply as he went. The aircraft was a Fox Moth, with an enclosed cabin holding three seats in the forward part of the fuselage, and an open cockpit for the pilot behind the wings. Nick clambered up into the cockpit, adjusted his helmet and goggles, and turned into the wind to take off.

Nick Lester was the son of a very rich man, and his Fox Moth, although far from being a new craft, gleamed in blue and silver. Nick had never known what it was to have a whim ungratified, and when he had expressed a desire to learn to fly during his last term at school, his father had seen to it at once that he got the necessary time off for flying lessons; and as soon as he passed the inspector, which he did on his seventeenth birthday, had bought him the Fox Moth.

'I'll buy you a new plane when I see how you shape,' he explained when Nick remonstrated with him for buying a second-hand aircraft. But Nick had now grown so fond of the airworthy little craft that he would not have parted with it for anything.

As the aeroplane climbed up to fifteen hundred feet, Nick could see the figure of his father walking slowly up the terrace steps towards the library windows. As he watched the stooping form the boy felt a momentary pang of uneasiness. Dad did not look well. Was he ill, or was he worried? For the first time in his life Nick wished that he knew more about his father's business. He had accepted the fact of their wealth as a matter of course, and now he wondered where the money came from and whether things were not going well in that office in the City whither Mortimer Lester went for a short time several days a week.

The joy of flight soon put gloomy thoughts out of the boy's head, and he concentrated on some difficult aerobatics. The Fox Moth stunts well, and Nick was devoid of fear. Some of the antics he performed would have done credit to an experienced test-pilot, and when he was down on the ground again he had forgotten his momentary worry about his father, and was beginning to look forward to the projected visit to Canada.

'Who is Uncle Nicholas, Dad?' he asked that night, as the pair of them sat at dinner. Nick did not remember the mother he had lost when he was barely three years old, and to him it was really pleasanter to be sitting thus alone with his father than to have Lou there with her eternal chatter. Nick was fond of his sister, of course, but in his opinion she giggled a good deal and talked a lot of rot. He hoped that two years in Switzerland would put some sense into her head.

'Uncle Nicholas?' Mortimer Lester looked up with a smile. 'Why, he's my younger brother. Between you and me, Nick, he's a bit of a scamp. At least, he used to be. That's why my father shipped him off to Canada, incidentally.'

'What did he do? Rob a bank?' asked Nick flippantly.

'No, no! Nothing of that kind! But he didn't seem inclined to settle down to any sort of work. He wouldn't come into the firm and pull his weight, so my father left it to me. But Nicholas didn't mind. He said he didn't want a business career, and I'm bound to say that his life has amply proved it.'

'What is the business, Dad?' asked Nick, suddenly remembering his thoughts while flying that morning.

'Exporting and importing,' said Mortimer Lester shortly. 'And then Nicholas married a Canadian girl, and after that he seemed quite to have adopted the country.'

'I see. What do you export and import, Dad?' queried Nick, feeling that he was being put off.

'All sorts of things,' said Mortimer Lester, his watchful eyes on his son. 'We don't want to talk about the firm now. You're not coming into it. You're adopting flying as your career.'

'I know,' said Nick lamely. 'But I'd like to know a little about your work, you know, Dad.'

Mortimer Lester stared at him for a moment and then gave a sigh.

'I think not, old boy,' he said quietly. 'It would

take too long to explain. You don't understand high finance and international currencies, do you?'

Nick shook his head with a half-smile.

'Afraid not, Dad.'

'Let's talk about something else, then. I'll write to Nicholas to-night if you're sure you'd like to go.'

For a moment the boy hesitated. During the day the thought of taking his plane across to Canada had delighted him, but now he felt an unaccountable reluctance to go. He wished that he could have spent more time with his father, who had always been so good to him and whom he really knew so little. He had been at boarding-school ever since he was seven years old, and holidays had often been spent with other people. He leaned forward across the table.

'I wish you were coming too, Dad,' he said.

'I'll join you later,' said Mortimer Lester steadily.

Nick sat back, baffled.

After that evening things seemed to move very quickly. Mortimer Lester telephoned to his brother—a thing that startled Nick somewhat—and in a very short time the Fox Moth was dismantled and packed ready for shipment. Almost before he had quite realized that he was going, Nick was waving good-bye to his father from the deck of the *Queen Mary*.

As the shore receded into the mist, the boy pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and studied the address written on it. 1072 Main Street North,

Moose Jaw, Canada. It seemed a very long way away.

Mortimer Lester watched the ship until it was out of sight, and then got back into his car for the long drive back to London. As he lay back in the luxurious saloon, many might have envied the rich man being carried so swiftly and comfortably back to town. But if Nick could have seen the worried frown on his father's face as he studied slips of paper and made notes all through the journey, he would have regretted deeply that he had left him without knowing exactly why he was being sent off so abruptly on a holiday in another continent.

Mortimer Lester went straight to his office in Threadneedle Street, and found his two partners waiting there. He sat down wearily in his chair and looked at them inquiringly.

'They won't pay,' said Mr. Clayton, one of the partners, quietly. 'We shall have to wait.'

'They must be made to pay!' said the third man, Arthur Weedon, shrilly. 'We can't wait! They'll have to pay.'

'They can't,' said Lester in a tired voice. 'But you're right, Weedon—we can't wait.'

'But this means bankruptcy,' said Weedon in a whisper.

'I'm afraid it does.'

'We can't do it! We can't do it! We owe too much. We must summons Gurtheimers.'

'It won't be any good,' said Mortimer Lester steadily. 'I've seen this coming for a long time, Weedon. I'm sorry we ever did business with

Gurtheimers. They're a shady firm. And now we're left to face our shareholders.'

'All right—blame me,' said the man Weedon sulkily.

'I'm not blaming you,' said Lester wearily.

'But I am,' said Clayton firmly. 'You know perfectly well, Lester, that you wouldn't have dealt with that firm unless Weedon had persuaded you.'

'Recriminations are no good,' said Lester quietly. 'The thing is to think constructively now. We owe about five hundred thousand pounds, and if we wind up the firm we can only find about a third of that. My personal fortune will go in too. You all know what I possess. The house and estate will fetch a good figure; and the steam yacht, the cars, and my own investments will go a long way towards providing the missing money. What can you two do?'

'I can do a good bit,' said Clayton at once. 'It isn't pleasant, of course, but I've got a shoot in Scotland and a nice little place in Surrey that will bring in a comfortable sum. I think we shall pretty well manage to meet our obligations if we pull together, Lester.'

'What about you, Weedon?'

'You can count me out,' said the man viciously. 'I'm not throwing my money away! I shall realize on all my investments and go for a long holiday—that's what I shall do. And I should advise you two to do the same. After all, you could get clean away before any one realized anything was wrong.'

'And leave debts to the tune of five hundred

thousand pounds?' asked Mortimer Lester dangerously. 'Think again, Weedon! What about the people who have invested their savings in the firm?'

'They don't interest me,' said Weedon callously. 'Well, I think I'll be going. I've a few little jobs to see to before I take my holiday. Good afternoon.'

He snatched up his hat and departed. The two remaining in the board-room heard his footsteps die away as he ran down the stairs, and then Clayton turned to Mortimer Lester.

'The first of the rats to leave the sinking ship,' he observed. 'I'm sorry we ever took that chap into the firm, Lester.'

'Too late to think of that now,' said the other. 'We must start getting everything ready for the Official Receiver.'

'It's hard on your kids,' said Clayton after a pause. 'They'll be hard hit.'

'I've sent them away,' said Mortimer Lester abruptly. 'Frankly, Clayton, I may be a coward, but I couldn't bear to see their disappointment when all this came out.'

'What have you done, then?' asked Clayton curiously.

'I've put Lou to school in Switzerland, and paid the fees in advance. She won't suffer. And Nick has gone to stay with his uncle in Canada. Poor lad! He thinks he's coming back to go to Cambridge, but there'll be no university career for him. I'm hoping he'll take the blow like a man and find a job out there.'

'If he's anything like his father he'll be all right,'

said Clayton with a smile. 'But I'm glad I never married. I can start again without any handicaps.'

'Well, let's get these papers sorted out,' said Mortimer Lester, rising heavily from his chair. 'You know, Clayton,' he added, pausing suddenly, 'this has been hanging over me for weeks. There have been times when I've been within an ace of telling Nick all about it, but I just couldn't face it.'

'It might have been better if you had done so,' said Clayton gravely.

'I don't know. You see, old boy, I don't know him very well, although he is my own son. We've seen so little of each other. If he'd behaved like Weedon, now, I think I'd have blown my brains out!'

'No chance of that!' said Clayton warmly.

'I hope not—but I dared not risk it. There were times, too, when I thought that he suspected something. He pressed me pretty hard one evening to tell him something about the firm. But I couldn't face telling him that ruin was coming.'

About a week later, just as Nick was stepping aboard the train at New York which would bring him to Moose Jaw in Canada, the firm's papers were put into the hands of the Official Receiver, and the firm of Lester, Clayton & Weedon ceased to exist.

CHAPTER II

MOOSE JAW

'How do I get to number 1072 Main Street North, please?' asked Nick, addressing a lanky individual who was plying a broom on the platform of the station at which the boy had just alighted.

'Take a street car, buddy,' was the drawling reply, as the man pushed his cap to the back of his head and grinned at the new-comer. 'You're English, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Nick, rather surprised.

'Ah, well, we won't hold it against you,' was the reply, and the man turned his back and went on with his work.

Seizing his suit-case, Nick marched out of the station, and presently, after a few more questions, found the right tram. He was soon rattling down the street, looking with some surprise at the apparently Arctic conditions that reigned everywhere. Never in his life, except in Switzerland, had he seen so much snow as he had during the journey in the train up from New York. In England, in early March, it had been crisp and sunny, with snow-drops and early spring flowers already in bloom. He recalled an almond tree in full blossom in Lou's garden. But here everything was still thickly covered with snow. People were walking about with fur gloves, boots, caps, and collars. Nick had never seen so much fur in his life, and found the men's hats rather amusing, as they were mostly fur caps with ear-pieces that fastened under the chin.

He was put down after a rather long ride, and told that the number he was seeking was near at hand. He found it quite soon—a low, rather ramshackle-looking building standing well back from the road, with several peevish-looking chickens wandering about in the front garden.

For a moment he hesitated. This was not at all what he had expected. He had been surprised not to find some one to meet him at the station, and now this untidy house put him off considerably. However, while he was standing staring at it, the door opened, and a woman poked her head out.

‘Don’t stand on the sidewalk,’ she called. ‘Come right in if you want anything. If you don’t, move right on.’

‘I’m looking for Mr. Nicholas Lester’s house,’ he said hesitatingly.

‘Land sakes! Are you the English nephew? Come right in!’ A pleasant smile brightened her face, and she threw open the door. Nick saw a plump little woman in a bright but rather dilapidated wrapper, with faded fair hair in curl-papers. He supposed it was some sort of a charwoman, and wondered why she was allowed to wander about the house and answer the door in that array.

‘Well, fer land sakes! Aren’t you going to kiss your Aunt Hetty?’ she demanded reprovingly as he entered the house. Nick flushed and stared.

‘Are—are you my aunt?’ he asked feebly.

‘Of course I’m your aunt! There now!’ She gave him a hearty kiss on both cheeks, just as a tall, untidy man came down the stairs.

'Well, well! My dear boy, so you've arrived,' said the new-comer, holding out a welcoming hand. 'So you're Morty's boy. The very image of him! Come in, my lad. Hetty will take your grip upstairs.'

'Thanks very much—I'll take it up,' stammered Nick, hardly liking to hand over his suit-case to his aunt as if she were a footman, but she snatched it out of his hand with a laugh.

'Land sakes! We don't want any of your English airs here, sonny. I'm going right up to fix myself, anyhow.'

Nick followed his uncle into a small room, littered with books, papers, and tobacco ash. Half-smoked cigarettes seemed to be everywhere, and a layer of dust covered everything.

'This is my sanctum, my dear boy,' said Nicholas Lester with a charming smile, waving his hand airily over the disorder. 'I don't allow Hetty to clean up in here—the dear soul would have all my valuable papers in the ash can before I knew what she was doing!'

'It's—it's nice and warm, Uncle, isn't it?' said Nick, taking off his overcoat and looking for somewhere to put it. 'I—er—would you like a window open?'

Nicholas Lester roared with laughter.

'Don't you start opening windows before May, my boy,' he said jovially. 'We have central heating here, you know, and the ventilation is perfect. Quite perfect. No nonsense about open windows in this part of the world! If you're lucky enough

to be able to get warm, you *stay* warm. And don't you forget it. But sit down and tell me how old Morty is getting on. When I heard his voice on the telephone the other day—why, it took me back years, and I thought of the Old Country and how the hedges used to look in June.'

'I thought he was going to write—I didn't think he'd telephone all this way,' said Nick. 'Why, you might not have been here.'

'Ah, yes, my boy—the post office people warned me to expect the call. But tell me—how is old Morty looking? How does he carry his years? Does he look much older than me?'

Nick looked thoughtfully at the figure in front of him. Nicholas Lester bore a certain family resemblance to his brother Mortimer, but there were many differences. His hair was rather long, untouched by grey, and very untidy. Nick remembered his father's neatly cut, neatly brushed iron-grey hair. Then Nicholas Lester wore an untidy, loose-fitting tweed suit, of a style unfamiliar to the boy, while Mortimer had always appeared in clothes of unmistakable London cut. Nicholas's fingers were stained, too, with nicotine, and that Mortimer Lester never allowed to happen, although he, also, was a heavy smoker.

'Yes, Uncle, he looks older than you do—quite a bit,' said the boy at last. 'But I think he's very fit and all that. He doesn't ever seem to be ill.'

'Ah, he's lucky,' said Nicholas Lester bitterly. 'My digestion—alas!'

He shook his head mournfully, and Nick has-

tened to change the subject by asking if there was an aerodrome near by.

'Yes, sure. The finest aerodrome in Saskatchewan. Just about a couple of miles from here. Why? Interested in aeroplanes?'

'Well, I brought my Fox Moth over with me,' said Nick hesitatingly. 'It was directed to the aerodrome at Moose Jaw, so I expect it's there by now. I've some more kit at the station, by the way,' he added.

'Gee, kid! D'you mean to say you've brought your own aeroplane with you?' ejaculated Uncle Nicholas, relapsing into a somewhat Canadian accent in his excitement.

'Yes,' nodded Nick.

'Gosh old hemlock! Wait a minute, now.'

Nick sat down again while his uncle grabbed a telephone and put through a call, scribbling agitatedly meanwhile on a scrap of paper beside him. A perfectly incomprehensible conversation followed between Nicholas Lester and an unseen person with a nasal voice quite audible where the boy was sitting, during which Uncle Lester informed the other man that he would need a column, while the other man advised him to cut it down to a stick.

'What on earth was that, Uncle?' he asked frankly when the receiver was hung up once more.

'What was what?' inquired the man absently, still scribbling for dear life.

'What do you want a column for?'

'What do I want a column for? Listen to this—all in caps across three columns: WELL-KNOWN

MOOSE JAW JOURNALIST WELCOMES FLYING NEPHEW.
YOUNG AVIATOR VISITS ONLY SURVIVING RELATIVE.
What about that, eh?’

‘I don’t know what you’re getting at,’ said Nick with a slight frown. Was his uncle making fun of him?

‘What you lack, dear boy, is news sense,’ said Uncle Nicholas, writing busily. ‘The unusual is news. And news is paid for. I’m doing a column for the *Moose Jaw Mercury and Daily Courier* on your arrival by air from England. What is the name of your plane, by the way?’

‘A Fox Moth. But, Uncle—you can’t say I arrived by air. The plane isn’t unpacked yet!’

‘Don’t be silly!’ was the terse reply. ‘Now let me see . . . “Silver gleaming dot high in the heavens—hm—hm—distant roar of the engine——”’

‘But, Uncle, that plane isn’t capable of flying the Atlantic, you know,’ said Nick, flushing a deep red.

‘That doesn’t matter! What you lack, dear boy, is a grip of essentials. What you want in the newspaper world is punch—zing—get me?’

‘Oh, well—what did you mean when you said that bit was all in caps across three columns?’

‘A streamer, of course.’

‘But what’s that?’

‘Boy, even for an Englishman you’re derved ignorant,’ said Uncle Nicholas, looking up for a moment from his paper. ‘A streamer is a big, bold headline right across the page. Got that?’

‘I see. And I suppose by caps you mean capital letters.’

'I do.'

'And what did that man mean when he said something about a stick?'

'He meant a shorter measurement than I think the matter warrants,' said Uncle Nicholas shortly. 'Now, move your hat, dear boy—it's on my typewriter.'

For a few moments the typewriter clicked furiously, and then Uncle Nicholas sprang up, seized a fur cap from under a file of papers, snatched up a heavy fur coat from a corner of the room, and told Nick to get his things on and look sharp about it.

'Nicholas, where are you going?' called a feminine voice from upstairs as they went towards the front door.

'Up-town, Hetty. Can I bring you in anything?' was the reply.

'Yes, I'm out of grapefruit—you might bring in some,' was the reply. 'And don't be late or dinner will be spoilt.'

When they got outside the gate Uncle Nicholas looked up and down the road, and then turned to the boy.

'Not a street car in sight,' he said genially. 'What do you say to a taxi, dear boy?'

'Right you are, Uncle,' said Nick cheerily.

'Splendid!' He waved to a passing taxi, which instantly swerved towards them. 'Hm. I suppose you have plenty of Canadian money, dear boy? As a matter of fact, I'm cleaned right out until I can get to the bank.'

'Eh? Oh, of course I've plenty of money,

Uncle,' said Nick readily. Uncle Nicholas seemed reassured by this statement, and gave the driver directions to take them first to the offices of the *Mercury and Daily Courier*, and then to the aerodrome. After a ride of some minutes they pulled up at a large building, and Uncle Nicholas got out, telling the boy to wait in the taxi until he returned.

When he did so, a man with a large camera followed at his heels, and Nick felt some misgivings as he got into the taxi with them, and accompanied them to the aerodrome. He was beginning to think that this strange uncle of his had done well to leave England at a fairly early age!

'Now we'll find an aeroplane,' said Uncle Nicholas briskly, as they got out of the taxi, which still obligingly waited for them. 'Got your flying helmet with you, Nick, or shall I borrow one for you?'

'No, mine's packed, of course,' said Nick. 'But what on earth do you want one for now?'

'My dear lad, just put yourself in my hands and don't argue, will you? You don't want to spoil the finest scoop the *Mercury*'s had for months, do you? Just keep your mouth shut and do as you're told, and everything will be all right.'

'Here's a fine plane, Lester,' said the photographer, pointing to a big Douglas DC2, waiting on the tarmac for its load of passengers.

'Too big,' said the enterprising journalist sadly. 'I've said it's a little plane all the way through my stuff.'

'Too bad,' said the photographer, turning to scan the hangars.

'Hello, boys. Anything I can do for you?' boomed a cheerful voice, and a stout man with a cigar in his mouth sauntered up.

'Ah, Harry—this kid here's my nephew,' began Uncle Nicholas, and the big man shot out his hand at once.

'Pleased to meet you, kid,' he said, shaking Nick's hand heartily. 'Any nephew of Nicholas Lester's is a friend of mine. What can I do for you?'

'Er—I wonder if my aeroplane has arrived yet,' asked Nick eagerly.

'I guess it has. Want it assembled?'

'Rather!'

'We can't wait for that,' interrupted Uncle Nicholas. 'Say, Harry, haven't you a nice little plane the kid can be photographed up against?'

'Sure I have,' said the man obligingly. 'Come right along. What is your plane, buddy?'

'A Fox Moth,' said Nick.

'Wal, fer cryin' out aloud! If that isn't the very thing! Why, boys, I got a fleet of 'em doin' the Regina circuit. Come right along.'

Nick was posed, flying helmet in hand, leaning against the fuselage of one of the firm's Fox Moths in such a way that the identification letters were obscured. Then they all went back in the taxi to the town, the photographer was dropped at the offices of the paper, and Nick and his uncle went back to number 1072 Main Street North.

'You're late,' snapped Aunt Hetty as they went in. 'Now don't tell me! I know it all! And don't forget you're on the air at five to-day.'

'On the air?' Nick looked up with interest.

'Broadcasting a short talk on the political situation in Europe, dear boy,' said Nicholas Lester with a smile. 'I'm a busy man, you see. A very busy man. I rather fancy Morty would be surprised sometimes if he could see me now.'

Nick rather fancied, too, that such might be the case!

CHAPTER III

INDIAN LEAP

A FEW hundred miles north-west of Moose Jaw, near the junction of the Christina and Athabaska rivers, is the town of Indian Leap. The railway ambles up to it and stops. If you want to go beyond you must go by river, by mule, or by dog-train. Alternatively you may walk if you so desire.

Near the river, at the eastern end of the main street, stood a big shack, the property of Martin Crossland. The railway ran at the back of it and the river in front; at one side groups of dogs and Indians clustered indifferently, and inside five men sat discussing a new venture.

The railway was not the property of Martin Crossland, and that thought occasionally troubled him a little. He owned the fleet of river boats that plied up and down the Athabaska and Christina, and he owned mules, sledges, and dogs, all of which he hired out to prospectors, trappers, and travelers of all sorts. He would have liked to be able to say that he owned the railroad too, but that snorted and clanged its way into the station once a week without any leave from him.

Martin Crossland, a big man with kindly, shrewd eyes, was known and liked over a pretty big stretch of country. His business deals were quoted with chuckles, but his honesty was never called in question. He sincerely hoped that his new venture would make him even more talked about than ever.

The shack was a big, single-roomed building,

with the inevitable nearly red-hot stove in the middle. A bunk was at one end, and a roll-top desk of astonishing modernity at the other. Near the stove was a big table, and round it, as close as they could get to the warmth, were five tried friends.

In towns men stay in cliques. Like clings to like, and instinctively distrusts men of different outlooks. In the wilds, where companionship is a precious thing, this does not happen. Men come to recognize good in other types than their own and gain much that is of value with the recognition.

It would be hard to find five more different types than the men sitting in Crossland's shack at this time, and yet all would have been both surprised and hurt if that fact had been commented upon. They were friends, and saw nothing strange or unusual in each other.

Martin Crossland, a big cigar in his mouth, was a typical business man, with his burly form and shrewd eyes. By his side sat a little, dried-up man whose eyes reflected the same quality of shrewdness, but who seemed to have no other similar characteristic, unless it was that of humour. Reuben Mathers was the storekeeper, whose little shop on Main Street was the informal club and meeting-place where all the gossip of the day was exchanged. He had his hand on the pulse of Indian Leap, and no major decision affecting the little town could be taken without Reuben's opinion being sought.

A tall, thin trooper of the Mounties sat next to him, whistling softly to himself. This habit of whistling did not mean that Trooper Curtis was

not listening; rather was it a sign that he was concentrating hard on the business in hand. Men had been known to complain indignantly that the trooper was whistling softly when he clapped the handcuffs on their reluctant wrists, and Curtis had apologized for the apparent hard-heartedness, explaining that it was a trick that he'd caught from his father, also a trooper of somewhat legendary renown.

Sitting close at the far end were two tremendously differing individuals. Father Benet, French-Canadian head of the Catholic Mission, was small, white-haired, and blue-eyed. Strangers meeting him in town might visualize him taking a delicate part in a cathedral service, or listening in a detached way to polite conversation in a drawing-room. They would hardly recognize their man taking a dog-sledge across trackless snows, with a solitary Indian companion, muffled up to the ears in furs and with rime on his eyebrows, at the call of duty.

In the same way, when Mr. Hetherington of the Methodist Mission, on his infrequent visits to England, spoke to drawing-room meetings of his work in the frozen North, few of his hearers really visualized his portly figure on snow-shoes, or imagined that his mild brown eyes could blaze with anger when reasoning with a drunken prospector who had ill-treated some one or something.

The subject that had drawn these five men together was whether it would benefit the town of Indian Leap if Martin Crossland added aerial transport to his other methods of conveying people and goods from one place to another. And in the main

the five were of the opinion that the idea was a good one.

'I don't mind tellin' you, Martin, that I should find it dern useful,' said Trooper Curtis, after a preliminary tune in a soft whistle. 'Many's the time I've missed a man by an hour or so, when if there'd bin a plane handy I should ha' caught him.'

'I can conceive that I, too, might find it useful, my son,' said Father Benet reflectively. 'There are times when I am sent for in matters of life and death. It would be a good thing, I feel assured, for the town of Indian Leap to have an aerodrome.'

'What'll you charge, Martin?' chuckled Reuben Mathers. 'You'll have the monopoly, you know!'

'Ordinary trade rates,' said Crossland gruffly, shifting his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. 'I've had the monopoly in the river business for these parts for a good few years, haven't I? And I've never charged more than the ordinary rates, that I know of.'

'Aw, shucks! Rube was jokin',' said the trooper with a wide grin. 'Wasn't you, Rube?'

'Our dear brother is fond of his little joke,' said Mr. Hetherington with a benign smile.

'What do you think of it, sir?' asked Crossland, turning to the last speaker. 'Every one but you has had his say. What is your opinion?'

'Well, well, Crossland, there's a lot to be said on both sides,' said Mr. Hetherington, leaning back in his chair, placing his finger-tips together, and preparing to enjoy himself. 'To begin with—can

you afford the loss supposing the venture fails? That is most important.

'I can take it,' said Crossland briefly.

'Splendid! Splendid! That is the spirit that wins. I feel, dear brother, that you have the will to win, that is so important in these matters.'

'Yeh! But who are your customers goin' to be?' asked Reuben Mathers bluntly. 'Keep to Mother Earth, Martin. You know where you be, there.'

'Believe me, I shall!' said the big man emphatically, while a broad smile creased his face. 'I'm not doing the flying, you may bet your bottom dollar! I'll finance the thing, and I'll buy the planes and petrol, and everything that's needed. But I'll get a man to do my flying for me.'

'Very wise, my son,' smiled the old Father.

'I never thought you was goin' to turn into a pilot at your time of life,' grinned the trooper.

'Hey! What's the matter with my time of life?' cried Crossland in aggrieved accents. 'I tell you I'm the man behind the show—the financier. I don't sail my old paddle-boats up and down the Athabaska, do I?'

'Certainly not, Crossland,' said Mr. Hetherington soothingly. 'By all means engage a pilot. An experienced pilot. I should advertise for one.'

'I thought of that,' admitted the man, getting up and going over to his desk. 'I thought if you all decided that I was on a good thing, I'd have this advertisement put in all the papers.'

'And if we'd all been against it, my son?' asked Father Benet with a sly twinkle in his eyes. Crossland gave an amused laugh.

'Can't fool you, can I, Father?' he said. 'Yes, I'd have put it in anyway. I'm dern sure that what Indian Leap needs is bringing up to date, and there's nothing like an up-to-date transport service to do that for a town.'

'Lots of other towns have got it,' said the trooper, rising and stretching his long legs.

'We might get the mails in time,' went on Crossland. 'At present there's lots of lonely spots where they get their letters anything from three days to three months late. We could change all that.'

'That is certainly a consideration,' said Mr. Hetherington. 'I could start a postal Sunday-school course for some of the districts that do not get a visit for months at a time. There is a great deal in what you say, Crossland.'

'We'll bring pelts down for the trappers and gold for the prospectors, and take stores up for everybody.'

'There'll be money in that,' said Reuben Mathers, nodding.

'Sure there will! Oh, it's a good scheme all right, all right! But I wanted to get you chaps to O.K. it before I did anything much about it.'

'You haven't bought your plane yet, then?' queried the trooper with a grin.

'No, my lad, I haven't. But I've seen one I like the look of, anyway.'

'Trust you for that. What is it? Ford? Douglas?'

'No, I want a single-engined craft. Getting petrol up here isn't too good, so we don't want anything

extravagant. The bus I like the look of is a Bel-lanca.'

'I know—Wright Cyclone engine, eh?' nodded Curtis.

'There isn't much you policemen don't know,' grinned Crossland.

'My business to know things,' said the trooper complacently.

'This advertisement—it seems to be good, my son,' said Father Benet, getting up with a smile. 'You do not want me more now, eh? I think I go now. The bell goes shortly for vespers, and I have things to see to first.'

'Well, good-bye, Father, and thanks for your advice,' said Crossland heartily.

'I, too, will go back to my little hut,' said Mr. Hetherington, heaving his portly form out of the chair and searching round for his furs. The two men left the hut together and proceeded up Main Street side by side, evidently discussing the new project as they went. Martin Crossland watched them from his window for a moment or two, and turned round with a laugh.

'Well, they're in favour, and you're in favour, Curtis, and Rube thinks it will bring the dollars into his till, so I guess I can get that advertisement mailed off,' he said. 'This'll be something new for me. But I guess Martin Crossland keeps abreast of the times. Yes, sir! Indian Leap is the finest little town in Alberta, and that's saying in the whole of the country. It's high time we had an airport here, and I'll see that we get one.'

CHAPTER IV

A SEVERE BLOW

ONCE young Nick Lester accustomed himself to the peculiar method of life in his uncle's household, he enjoyed his holiday very much indeed. He had been brought up to feel that money did not matter; if you wanted a thing you simply bought it, and that was all there was about it. At home comfort was everywhere, and the daily workings of the staff who brought this comfort about never came to light. Here all this was changed. Aunt Hetty was a proud housewife, although her nimble fingers were never allowed to scour and dust in her husband's study, and Nick soon got used to the sight of her in her wrapper and cap, trotting busily from one room to another, her shrill voice running on all the time, until late afternoon every day.

Here, too, money mattered a great deal, for there was very little of it. Prices were discussed before anything was bought, and Nick realized one day that his uncle had not repaid him the money spent on the taxi on the first day of his visit. However, being an intelligent lad, he had by then deduced that there was a certain shortage of cash in the home, and purposely forgot the debt for all time.

He spent a good deal of time at the aerodrome, and found flying conditions very different there from those at home. At first the mechanics had looked at him warily, for the wealthy Englishman is sometimes regarded askance in the Dominions until he can prove his worth; but the lad's unassuming

ways and obvious mastery of the art of flying earned him their respect, and he was treated as one of themselves within four days of his arrival.

The manager, an old friend of Uncle Nicholas, lent him one of the firm's light aeroplanes while his own was being assembled and skis fitted, and it was then that he learned some of the peculiarities of flying when the temperature is below zero. He found that he would have to equip himself with a tent-like nosebag to go over the engine when the plane was not in use, and a fire-pot to keep the oil from freezing and to help in warming up the engine before use.

He learned to draw off the oil the moment he landed, and to keep it in a warmed place ready for use next time. Once he was too slow about this, and found to his horror that the oil stiffened to a solid stick between the engine and the can that was waiting to receive it.

'Hey! What do I do now?' he shouted to a passing mechanic. The man grinned.

'Get a blow-lamp, buddy,' he advised.

'A blow-lamp? Isn't that dangerous?'

'Sure it's dangerous. But what else can you do?'

The man went off and returned with the article as Nick was hesitating, still wondering if he was joking or not. He crouched down and began to thaw out the oil, working upwards until it was flowing freely. Then he turned to the boy with a grin. 'You don't want to let that happen again,' he said. 'You want to act snappy, see? Things freeze out here!'

'I see they do. Thanks awfully.'

'See here, buddy,' said the man slowly, regarding the boy with a smile, 'you don't want to be so durned English, see?'

'I don't get you,' said Nick, flushing. 'I *am* English, and proud of it. What's the idea?'

'Well,' the man shrugged his shoulders, 'I guess that's O.K. to be proud of your country, but by the way you fly you might be a good Canadian until you open your trap.'

'And what do you mean by that?'

'Well, you say "pahss" instead of "pass", and "cahn't" instead of "can't", see? It just sounds silly to us, and spoils the show you put up in the air.'

'I'll think it over,' grinned Nick, and soon afterwards broached the subject to his uncle.

'He's right, you know,' said Nicholas Lester with a smile. 'I soon found that if I wanted to enter into the life of the people here at all I should have to drop my aggressive Englishness and talk as they do. So I did.'

'I see,' said Nick thoughtfully. 'After all, one way of pronouncing a word is as good as another, I suppose.'

'The mail's in, Nick,' called Aunt Hetty, poking her head into the study, where this conference was taking place. She handed two letters to Nick and bobbed out of sight again. The boy sat down and opened the letters with some surprise. One he recognized as being in his father's handwriting, but the other was from a stranger.

Nicholas Lester was, as usual, scribbling at his desk, and took no notice as the boy read his letters. But a little while later he glanced up, and was so struck by the pallor of Nick's face that he laid down his pen and got up.

'My dear boy—are you ill?' he asked with concern.

'It's Dad,' said Nick in a stifled voice. 'He's—he's in prison.'

'What on earth do you mean?' shouted Uncle Nicholas. The sound of his voice brought Aunt Hetty to the door.

'Land sakes, Nicholas! There's no call to shout at the poor boy like that, is there? What's he done?' she said.

'Come in and sit down,' growled Nicholas Lester. 'Now, Nick, just tell us what this is all about. What has Morty been doing? Has the business failed?'

'Yes,' gulped the boy.

'Well, what's he gone to prison for? Surely he hasn't been falsifying the books, or anything like that?'

'It's a plant of some sort,' said Nick, the colour coming back into his face as the initial shock passed off. 'He writes here a fairly cheerful letter, saying that the firm has to go bankrupt, and that he will have to sell the house and everything to meet his creditors. He says that the other partners, Mr. Clayton and Mr. Weedon, take different views. Mr. Clayton sides with him and throws everything he's got in to raise money for the people who have in-

vested their savings in Dad's company, but Mr. Weedon has gone to France so as to be out of the mess.'

'The sneakin' rat!' said Aunt Hetty energetically.

'Be quiet, Hetty! Where does the prison come in, Nick?'

'There's nothing about it in Dad's letter. He says he sent me here so that I should be out of all this mess. Why didn't he let me stay and help him?' cried the boy passionately, striking his clenched fist on the table.

'There's nothing in all this to justify prison,' said Nicholas Lester firmly. 'If he could pay all that he owed through selling his stuff, that would be the end of it.'

'That's where the other letter comes in. It's from the partner, Mr. Clayton. He says that when they came to go through all the papers they found some queer things, and they suspected that Mr. Weedon had been taking money out of the firm regularly. But before anything could be done Weedon himself gave information to the police, and Dad has been held responsible for the things that have gone wrong. Weedon planted some papers at home while Dad and Mr. Clayton were at the office, and now Dad has had to go to prison for seven years. It's—it's too awful.'

'It sounds bad,' said Nicholas Lester gravely.

'What about this Clayton guy,' demanded Aunt Hetty fiercely. 'Is he punk too?'

'I think he's straight enough,' said Nick wearily. 'He has thrown in everything he's got, and he says

he is going to work for enough money to open up Dad's case and try to prove him innocent.'

'That's the goods,' said Aunt Hetty approvingly. 'Well, don't take on, honey. Your home is with us as long as you like. And what about that little sister of yours?'

'Lou? She's at school in Switzerland,' said Nick. 'I remember Dad paid a year's fees in advance there. I wondered why at the time, but I suppose he thought he'd be over the worst of the trouble by then. He never contemplated this, I'm sure.'

'Of course he didn't, honey! Well, that little sister of yours can come here just as soon as she's ready. She can get a job in a store, or something.'

'You are a brick, Aunt Hetty,' said Nick gratefully. 'I—I shouldn't know where to go if it wasn't for you.'

'Of course your home's here, dear boy,' said Nicholas Lester, patting him on the back. 'But you'll have to think what you're going to do, you know. I mean, there'll be no money for gadding about in aeroplanes, and all that sort of thing. I should advise you to sell the Fox Moth, and I expect I could persuade the editor of the *Mercury* to give you a job on the reporting staff. How'd that appeal to you, eh?'

'It's awfully kind of you,' said Nick mechanically. He was finding it hard to realize that there would be no money for enjoyment in the future.

'Nothing of the sort! Between you and me, old Morty kept the flag flying here many a time when

we should have been on the rocks but for him—eh, Hetty?’

‘Sure,’ was the ready response. ‘And don’t be in too great a hurry to do anything, Nick. You’re here on a visit. Take your time. It’s been a great shock to you, but I’m sure you’ll get down to it O.K. Work isn’t so bad. I’ve done plenty of it and I know!’

‘You’re a brick,’ stammered Nick, looking at the bright, cheery face, framed in a dust-cap, beaming hospitably at him. ‘I’ll take a job just as soon as I can find one. And I’ll save up every penny to help Mr. Clayton open up Dad’s case. I *know* Dad’s not a crook, Aunt Hetty! And I’ll do all I can to prove it. But poor little Lou. It’s going to be an awful blow to her.’

‘Of course—she’s only a kid, and it’ll hit her hard,’ said the kindly woman sympathetically. ‘You write and tell her she can come out here to us just as soon as she likes. I guess we can raise the fare between us.’

Nick went up to his room after this conversation, and wrote several letters. The first was to his father and was full of generous indignation at the way he had been treated, promising to get the case reopened as soon as he could earn enough money to do so. This letter was to bring great comfort to an innocent man who had been sent to prison through the subtlety of an unscrupulous partner.

Nick also wrote to Mr. Clayton, announcing his determination to help, and asking if he could do more in England than he could in Canada. Clay-

ton, in a small bed-sitting-room, strangely unlike the luxurious study to which he was accustomed, smiled with pleasure as he read the letter, and reflected that the boy was a chip of the old block after all.

The third letter, to Lou, was more difficult to write, but he got it done somehow. He explained exactly what he meant to do, and told her that if she wished to leave the school at once, he would arrange for her to join him in Canada, but that if she decided to complete her education according to plan, he would make every effort to supply the fees when the year was up.

A rather frightened girl in an expensive school in Switzerland took fresh heart as she read the letter. After all, she reflected, most of the girls were being quite nice about it, and if Daddy wished her to finish in Switzerland, why, she would not run away, but would live down the unpleasantness and complete her education as he desired. She sat down and wrote a plucky letter, making light of her own feelings, and expressing her intention of doing exactly as her brother thought best.

Nick had not the heart to go up to the aerodrome again that day, and spent the afternoon walking, alone with his thoughts, through the town. With a sudden gesture of determination he joined a little group of men standing outside the public library, looking through the advertisement columns of the local paper, which had been cut out and pasted up for their perusal.

He instinctively recoiled from the first few jobs

that he saw advertised. A hand in a cannery, to deal with the hides, struck him as about the most unpleasant thing that a man could be. And he had no leanings towards the post of office-boy to a large insurance firm, either.

But as he read conscientiously through the columns, which were by no means all devoted to vacant posts, but mostly to the desires of unemployed folk, he saw something that struck him as exactly what he wanted. He carefully copied down the particulars, and set off for 1072 Main Street North with a lightening of the heart and a purposeful tread.

'I'm going after a job to-morrow, Uncle Nicholas,' he said, throwing down the fur cap that had been one of his first purchases in Moose Jaw.

'Good lad! What is it?' asked his uncle, putting down his pen and smiling with real pleasure.

'Flying,' said Nick nonchalantly, but with sparkling eyes. 'A chap called Crossland wants a pilot up in a place called Indian Leap, and I'm going up after the job. Got a map of the district, Uncle? I'd like to plot my course.'

CHAPTER V

A NEW JOB

SILENCE reigned over the little town of Indian Leap. The sun, a red ball, was sinking behind a fringe of pine trees, casting long shadows over the white snow. The river, iced over from bank to bank, was at one with the universal carpet of white, only showing by its different level that although solid, there was no earth beneath the white coat.

The roofs of the shacks were the same colour, and only a little way out of the town the trodden trails merged into the landscape, looking from above just a little darker than the untrodden ground on either side.

Martin Crossland sat in his shack, his feet up on the stove, with his pipe in his mouth, admiring the appearance of his advertisement in the *Mercury*. Down in the store Reuben Mathers gossiped with a couple of cronies, and in the shack that was the property of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Trooper Curtis wrestled with departmental returns.

In the little Catholic church an Indian was lovingly polishing the bright silver candlesticks, and in the Mission Hall Mr. Hetherington was humming softly to himself as he sorted out hymn-books ready for the next meeting.

A tiny sound cut through the silence, and Trooper Curtis, seeing an Indian stiffen and gaze skywards, suspended his clerical work and watched. He saw another Indian join the first, and they both gazed towards the southern sky for some moments. As

they did not shift their position the trooper rose from his chair, put on his hat and gloves, and joined them.

At first he could hear nothing, but he stared solemnly in the direction in which the others were looking, and suddenly made out a thin, thready sound that his quick brain recognized at once for the sound of an aeroplane engine. The sun was behind him, and as he focused his narrowed eyes on the south-eastern sky, he became aware of a tiny point of light that he guessed was a shaft of sunlight on the propeller of the advancing plane.

He strode down the little Main Street, his spurs jingling slightly and his heavy boots making a crunching sound on the packed snow. He poked his head into the store and grinned at Reuben Mathers.

'Plane comin',' he said briefly, and at once the slow conversation stopped, and three heads turned sharply in his direction.

'What d'you mean? Drat that trooper!' said Reuben feelingly. 'What the heck does he want to come and say a thing like that for? What plane's comin'? An' why?'

'Guess we might as well go look,' said a lanky trapper, shifting a quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other.

'Guess you're right. Come on, boys.'

Trooper Curtis was well on his way by the time the three men had left the store. He tapped lightly on the door of Crossland's shack, and went in.

'Hello, Martin. There's a plane comin' up the trail. Some one after your job, d'you think?'

'It'll be quick work if it is,' said Martin Crossland, hitching his legs down and reaching for his coat and fur cap. 'Where is he?'

'Still up top-side. But I guess he's headin' this way. What arrangements have you made fer receivin' aeroplanes, Martin?'

'I haven't made none,' said the man rather helplessly. 'I must say it didn't occur to me that any one'd fly up here. I figured they'd write, an' maybe come up by train.'

'Well, what would any guy want to be flyin' up at this time of year, in this district, if it wasn't to see you, Martin?'

'Search me!'

'You better take it he's for you, and make some arrangements for him, anyway. Listen! You can hear him quite plain now.'

Crossland moved to the door and stepped outside, followed by the trooper.

'What d'you figure I ought to do?' he asked.

'Ever bin up in an aeroplane?'

'No, I can't say I have.'

'Well, I'll tell you that all this'll just look a white screen to him! He won't know what's roofs and what isn't. So the sooner you think of a way of gettin' him down where you want him, the better it'll be fer him, see?'

'I get you,' said Crossland gruffly. 'Isn't there something about wind, too?'

'There isn't much to-day, anyway.'

'But there's a little. Guess I'll get some Indians to light fires——' He hesitated. 'Why, the flattest



Then he saw four little spurts of smoke

place is right here on the river bank, surely,' he finished.

'South of your shack gives him plenty of room,' nodded the trooper.

Crossland raised his voice in a shout, and at once several Indians appeared from various shacks and odd corners best known to themselves. Orders were swiftly given, and as Mathers and his two companions arrived the plan was explained to them.

Nick had been flying for nearly six hours at an average speed of ninety miles an hour, and he judged that he must be near his objective. He was flying at about two thousand feet, and was thoroughly bewildered with the sameness of the country beneath him. Almost as soon as he left Moose Jaw he had found himself over unbroken white. Saskatoon showed up after a while with unmistakable smoke, but most of the towns disappeared into the general snowy waste without the boy having any idea that he was flying over them.

He had kept a keen eye on his compass and on his air-speed indicator, and was fairly sure that he had not strayed from his course. But as he gazed anxiously down from his cockpit he could see no sign of life below him; only the darker shadow of the packed trail showed like a pencil line on the snow.

Then he saw four little spurts of smoke. He watched them for a moment, wondering whether they were a signal, and then headed towards them. When he was nearly overhead he saw various groups of men, and one man waved to him. Sure that at last he had reached Indian Leap, he put down the

nose of the plane and dived for the enclosure marked out by the four fires.

As he shot past the first group he switched off his engine. The men's faces were alight with welcome and interest, and Nick was sure that he had come to the right place. As he landed in a flurry of snow, skis screaming as they slid along, a tall trooper detached himself from a little party and came towards him.

Nick sprang from the cockpit, nosebag and oil tin in hand, and ran round to the front of the aeroplane. The propeller had stopped, and he knew that in a few moments the oil would stiffen in the cylinders. He waved a hand to the approaching Mountie, and set to work placing the nosebag over the engine. He turned the drainage tap that governed the sump, and saw with relief that the oil flowed freely from the hot engine.

A shadow fell across his shoulder as the Mountie came up, and Nick turned to grin at him.

'I say—can you get me a couple of planks?' he asked.

'What for?' asked Trooper Curtis.

'To run the skis on to before they freeze into the snow.'

'I get you, buddy.' The Mountie shouted to an Indian who was watching from the neighbourhood of one of the fires, and at once the man set off in the direction of Crossland's wood-pile. Crossland himself helped to bring up one of the substantial planks, and, with the assistance of Reuben Mathers, the plane was shifted bodily forward as soon as the

oil-draining was done. Then Nick straightened and grinned at the circle of faces around him.

'Thanks very much,' he said cheerily. 'And now—is there a stove in that shack?'

'You can bet your bottom dollar there is, buddy,' said Martin Crossland with a hearty laugh. 'And if you'll be so obliging as to tell me your name and business, we'll adjourn towards that same stove.'

'Name—Nick Lester. Business—applying for the job of pilot to a certain Mr. Martin Crossland,' said Nick promptly. 'Can you tell me where to find him?'

'Right here, buddy. I'm that very guy,' said Crossland, with a grin. 'But—you're English, aren't you?'

'I am. Is that anything against me?' asked Nick, sticking out his chin aggressively. There was a moment's silence.

'No,' said Crossland with an air of finality. 'Come right along.'

The party trooped along to the shack, and there Nick placed his can of oil carefully on a part of the stove that was not quite red-hot. Then he began to peel off his flying helmet and gloves with evident relief.

'Come in, boys,' said Martin hospitably, but the two trappers who had been in Mathers's store declined on the score that they had some gear to see to. Nothing, however, would have driven Reuben Mathers from the spot until he had heard all that there was to hear about the new-comer, and he and

the trooper accepted the invitation and stepped into the warmth of the shack.

'What I'd like to know is,' began Nick as the men were settling themselves comfortably in chairs, 'why does every one ask if I'm English as if they expected me to be a dud?'

There was a somewhat uncomfortable silence, broken at last by Reuben Mathers.

'Don't know how it is,' he said ruminatively, 'but out here we gets into the way of saying Englishman like you'd say Wop. Don't know why, I'm sure, but there it is.'

'I guess it's on account of the films,' said Trooper Curtis suddenly.

'We don't see so dern many films here!'

'That's so. But folks go back to the cities once in a while, and they visits the movies, an' as like as not they see a silly dude with a spy-glass in his eye and a silly hat, and he says "glahss" and "pahss", and they know it's an Englishman.'

'Have you ever seen a real Englishman behave that way?' demanded Nick, very red in the face.

'Can't say I have, buddy.'

'There was an Englishman up at Fort Vermilion one time. He was a dern good chap,' said Crossland in tones of surprise.

'What it comes to is that you see the American idea of a comic Englishman on the films, and take it as the real thing,' said Nick. 'Oh, well, I guess if I stay here it's up to me to make you change your minds.'

'Guess we'll soon turn you into a real Cana-

dian,' said Reuben Mathers soothingly. Nick stared at him a moment and then laughed.

'Not quite what I meant, but it doesn't matter,' he said.

'I get you, buddy,' said Crossland quietly. 'I'm willin' to say that Rube is unfortunate in his manner of expressin' himself, but he don't mean no harm. He's oke, is old Rube. Now, to get down to business. What experience have you had of flyin' in these latitudes?'

'None,' said Nick frankly. 'I came to Moose Jaw from England this month. I've done some flying round there, and I got here to-day. That's all.'

'I guess you hold your flying licences?' said Trooper Curtis, leaning forward a little. Nick stared at him, crimsoning slowly.

'I hold an "A" licence,' he said slowly. 'I clean forgot that I'd never taken the "B" certificate.'

'Too bad,' said Crossland gruffly.

'I banked everything on this,' said Nick, very white. 'And I—I've got to have a job!'

'Wait a minute! Wait a minute!' said the trooper good-naturedly. 'There's time, isn't there? You didn't figure to open your aerodrome till break-up, did you, Martin?'

'That's so,' admitted Crossland, looking relieved. 'It's only a question of satisfying a registered inspector, isn't it, buddy?'

'Yes, and I'm sure I could do that. I've got my log with me, and unless conditions are very different over here, I've done the requisite number of hours in the air easily.'

'What do you have to do?'

'Oh, well, they always examine you on the type of craft you're going to use.'

'That'll be a Bellanca,' said Crossland.

'Oh. Well, I guess there'll be no harm in me taking it up once or twice to get the feel of it before I face the examiner. I'll take the Fox Moth along too. You might find her useful for light taxi work.'

'Well, either I've hired you, or you've hired me,' said Martin Crossland with the ghost of a grin.

'I—I'm sorry!' stammered Nick.

'That's O.K., buddy! Now, I guess Rube can give you a shake-down in the loft over the store, and we'll get some Injuns on the job of building a shack for the aeroplanes. And to-morrow you an' me'll go into this matter of the "B" certificate.'

CHAPTER VI

WAITING FOR THE BREAK-UP

THE swift semi-Arctic twilight was falling fast as Nick and the others left Crossland's shack, and the boy turned anxious eyes towards the aeroplane.

'I say,' he began, 'I must get the Fox pegged down for the night. Somehow I don't look ahead like I ought to. It just didn't occur to me that there wouldn't be hangars here.'

'What do you want?' asked Trooper Curtis practically.

'Ropes, pegs, and a mallet,' said Nick instantly.

'Guess Rube can supply most of them. Want any help?'

'Guess I can manage, thanks,' said Nick, hoping that he was picking up the right intonation, and sounding less like an Englishman.

'Well, I'll come along and see Rube don't cheat ye.'

'Wal, fer cryin' out loud!' ejaculated the indignant Mathers. 'I guess I got the best rope in all Alberta, Trooper Curtis, an' the best pegs too.'

'That's oke, Rube.'

The storekeeper snorted, and the trooper began to whistle softly. Nothing more was said until they reached the little shack, and Mathers, reaching down behind a sack of sugar and a side of bacon, began to haul up a length of rope.

'How much d'ye want?' he asked after a while.

'I guess that'll do,' said Nick, plunging his hand

into his pocket. 'Now some pegs, and that'll be the lot. How much?'

The account was settled, and Nick shouldered the rope and looked round for something to put the pegs in.

'Can you lend me a sack for these?' he asked.

'Sure,' said Reuben at once, and then the boy set off with his burden.

He had only gone a few steps before the tall form of the trooper loomed up beside him.

'Forgot yer mallet,' he said. 'Here—give us a hand of those pegs.'

'Thanks very much,' said Nick, who had made up his mind that he would ask no help from any one, but who did not mind accepting it if it was volunteered. Trooper Curtis took the sack, and presently helped with the pegging down of the Fox Moth, until even its proud owner was sure that it would be safe.

He supped that night off beans and bacon and cocoa with Reuben Mathers, in the light of a smoky oil lamp. He was very tired, but when finally he climbed up the ladder to the loft that was to be his home in future, he rolled up in warm blankets on a bed of spruce, and lay with wide-open eyes in the pitch darkness, his mind revolving rapidly round the amazing happenings of the past two days.

After those first few moments of blank misery he had hardly thought of his father's misfortune at all, but now he began to wonder what he was doing, how he was being treated, and what hopes Mr. Clayton really had of proving his innocence.

He wondered what Lou would be doing, and hoped that she was not taking it too hardy. Then he wondered what Uncle Nicholas and Aunt Hetty would think if they could see him at that moment. He could imagine his aunt's shrieks of indignation at the thought that he was lying on spruce boughs, with no proper bed at all between him and the floor boards.

He wriggled a little deeper into the blankets. The spruce smelled nice, and he was warm and very comfortable. If this was what going out into the world to earn your living was like, well, it wasn't too bad! Then he fell asleep.

He was over at Martin Crossland's shack early the next morning, for there was still a good deal to be discussed, and he did not want any misunderstandings about his position. Accordingly, he reiterated his complete inexperience as soon as he saw his employer.

'So if you've thought better of it, sir, I shall quite understand,' he said quietly.

'You don't have to call me "sir",' growled Martin. 'We don't go in for that much over here. Every one calls me Martin, and I guess you can do the same.'

'Thanks very much,' said the boy eagerly.

'And about you not knowin' the ropes an' all that, I guess you'll soon learn. And I'd sooner have a good learner than some chap who's sure he knows it all. I rather figure flyin's one of those things that it ain't safe to say you know it all, eh?'

'You're dern right,' laughed Nick, and Crossland laughed too.

'That's it! You're pickin' it up fine,' he chaffed. 'Rube'll say he's turned you into a good Canadian if you go on this way. Now, about pay. What did you figure to get?'

'I haven't the slightest idea,' said Nick frankly. 'What did you figure to give?'

'Come, come! You're lookin' for the post, ain't you? What was you goin' to ask?'

'Well, you're hiring me, aren't you? What did you aim to offer?'

The man slid his fur cap to the back of his head and scratched meditatively.

'Tell you what—we'll go over to Athabaska to get delivery of that Bellanca and see about your "B" licence. We'll find out what they pay pilots there—it's a pretty big aerodrome as they go around these parts. And we'll figure out what you get from that. It won't be so much, on account of you bein' inexperienced, see? And it'll be a bit more on account of you throwing your plane into stock.'

'Sounds oke to me,' said Nick. 'I need money badly,' he added, his face darkening suddenly.

'Is that so? Trouble?' asked Martin in a kindly way. Nick hesitated, and felt suddenly that he could not keep it all locked up in his heart for ever. If Martin Crossland did not want to employ him if his father was in prison, well, then it was better that he should find that out now than later, when it might come out by accident.

'I'd better tell you,' he said, his voice suddenly

hard. 'My father's in prison, and I want the money to reopen the case and prove his innocence.'

There was a moment's silence, while Crossland, looking utterly astounded, sat down by the stove and took off his cap.

'Why, buddy,' he said at last, 'that's real tough. You mean he didn't do what they copped him for?'

'No, he did not!'

'O.K., that's good enough for me. But I'm glad you told me, kid. I guess that's way back in England.'

'Yes. I—I only heard about it a couple of days ago, and I knew at once I'd have to find a job and make a fight for it. You see, we were rich. The Fox was my own plane. And now there's nothing left.'

'Just like a book,' said Crossland, getting up. 'Well, things do happen that way sometimes. You're quite right to settle right down to a job of work. Nothing like work when things go wrong. Now, don't let it get on your mind. We'll see how this transport plan works, and maybe I can give you a commission if we make a packet out of it.'

'I—I say—that's good of you,' stammered Nick.

'Shucks, buddy—cut that right out! Now, look here—there's a lot I guess I've got to teach you. One thing—there's no flying much here at this time of year. It's gettin' on towards what we call break-up. That means when the rivers get all full of broken ice-floes and all manner of foolishness, and until they clear it ain't safe to fly, see?'

'I don't quite get that,' said Nick. 'What have the rivers got to do with it?'

'Well, it's like this. In the summer most of the flyin' up here, and farther north where most of our routes will be, is done on pontoons. Floats, see? We use the rivers, because when they're clear, they're better for comin' down on than ground that may be humpy and may be full of tree-stumps.'

'That's clear enough,' said Nick, nodding.

'You've no experience of pontoons, maybe?'

'Afraid not. I'd landed on nothing but the ordinary wheeled undercarriage until I came out here, but I've got hold of the skis all right, so I guess I shan't fall down on pontoons.'

'That's the spirit! Well, as I was sayin', in the winter there's a little flyin'—not much because the light's so bad, and there isn't much of it farther north. Then when the ice gets crazy, like it is now, there's no flyin' at all until it breaks good an' proper. The radio gives the all-clear. Then flyin' starts.'

'But I suppose you can start when you like?' objected the boy.

'Wal, it's like this. There's a sort of gentleman's agreement that no one starts before the given date. Mind you, there's no law about it, an' there's nothin' written down. But there it is. We just naturally don't fly till the O.K. comes through, sayin' all rivers clear.'

'I see.'

'And the same at freeze-up. The warnin' is given over the radio, an' all flying packs up fer a

spell. Pontoons are shifted and skis fitted, and the winter season starts when everything's closed right down. But there's a dead spell in the spring and the fall, and it's that dead season right now. We're waiting for the ice to break.'

Nick was tremendously interested to hear all this, and had no doubt at all of his ability to fly on floats as well as on skis. He wrote a hurried letter to his uncle, telling him of his good fortune in landing the job, and another, shorter one, to his sister, telling her the same thing. Then Crossland was ready for the trip to Athabaska, and the boy had to get the plane ready.

Nick knew well the dangers of starting up with a cold engine, and he had the fire-pot going under the nosebag for some time before he brought the warm oil out in its can from Crossland's stove. He started the engine as soon as he could, and unshipped the pegs while it was running at half-throttle, completing the warming process.

Crossland meanwhile was walking round the little plane, inspecting it with great interest.

'Say, this front cabin is a great idea,' he said. 'Holds three, eh? But why do you sit up there in the cold?'

'It's supposed to give the pilot a better range of vision,' said Nick, busy with his ropes.

'Say, this is *de luxe*, eh? This is a grand little bus. Oh, gee! Here's a thing I forgot. What do you do about petrol, buddy?'

'I brought that cabin full of tins,' laughed the boy, 'and I filled up before I warmed up the engine.'

'You think of everything,' grinned Crossland, getting into the cabin and tucking the rug round his knees. 'We'll make a good team, I guess.'

The flight to Athabaska was uneventful, and Nick found the aerodrome without any trouble. There the Bellanca was wheeled out and inspected, and, after a prolonged warming of the Cyclone engine, Nick took the plane up for a trial trip.

It was his first experience of a big freight-carrier, and he took one of the older men aside and asked him frankly if he could give him any tips about its behaviour. The pilot was amused at the youngster's earnestness, but told him all he could, and Nick was duly grateful.

'This is my first job,' he said with a cheery grin, 'and I don't want to crash before it's properly started.'

'You're dern right,' said the pilot. 'Get your first pay-roll in your pocket before you qualify for hospital!'

Fortunately the inspector was not on the aerodrome just then, for Nick narrowly escaped disaster with his new mount. But he took off and landed solemnly about thirty times in succession, while Crossland saw to some business in the town, and just before they were due to return to Indian Leap, in order to catch the light, he announced that he was ready to see the inspector as soon as it could be arranged.

An appointment was made and the aircraft wheeled in, and then Nick had a sudden thought.

'You ought to have a ground engineer too, you

know,' he said seriously. 'If we're anything like busy later on I shan't be able to service the planes as well as fly them.'

Crossland saw the point, and a little more time was wasted. But before they left Athabaska he had engaged the services of an elderly, gaunt-featured man, who answered occasionally to the name of Horridge. This individual knew and disapproved of the Bellanca. He also knew and disapproved of Fox Moths. Nick was presently to learn that the aeroplane had not yet been designed that Horridge did not know and disapprove of.

Nick duly passed the test, and received his 'B' certificate. The next job was to bring home the Bellanca and its melancholy attendant. By this time a substantial hangar had been built, with a smaller shack beside it for spares, of which Nick insisted that they bought a good supply. Spare skis, spare pontoons, spare parts for the engines, were all housed in the little shack, and Horridge himself was housed by one of Mr. Hetherington's congregation, with whom he discovered an unexpected affinity of thought.

CHAPTER VII

THE ICE BREAKS

BUSY days followed the collecting of the Bellanca. It was decided to unship the skis on the freight-carrier at once and put on the pontoons, thus making the aircraft ready for immediate use as soon as the ice broke. A wheeled trolley was made, too, for carting the plane down to the river when everything was ready, and Nick and Horridge worked together with an occasional audience of small, solemn Indian children.

It was rather a shock to Nick to find that his story became common property within a very short time of his telling it to Crossland, but he saw the wisdom of it, and was grateful, too, for the earnest way in which it was debated in the store. The wrongs of Mortimer Lester became as real to casual trappers in conversation with Reuben Mathers as their own troubles, and many were the suggestions that were brought to the boy from time to time, mostly dealing with the proper treatment of the scoundrelly partner, Weedon.

One old man offered an ancient Colt to Nick one day, and advised him to go home and shoot 'ther raskil'! Nick explained that he must leave that to his father, and that his task was to get him out of prison before any further steps could be taken. The old man admitted that this was a very proper feeling.

The first pay-day gave Nick a tremendous thrill, and, after settling with Reuben Mathers for his

board and lodging, he had quite a nice little roll of bills to put away towards the great object of his father's defence. After that, whenever he was inclined to feel a bit down and to wonder what Mortimer Lester was doing, he thought of the roll of bills and took comfort.

Life went on placidly, although busily, and as time moved on Nick became acquainted with most of the inhabitants of Indian Leap. He accompanied Martin Crossland and Horridge as a matter of course to the little mission hall run by Mr. Hetherington on Sunday mornings, and loafed luxuriously for the rest of the day, listening to tall tales told by Reuben and other old-timers.

Father Benet appeared quietly one evening with a solitary Indian and a dog-team, and was welcomed by Crossland with real affection. Nick, who had expected a certain rivalry, not to say hostility, to appear between the Father and the Methodist minister, was somewhat surprised to see a warmth in their greeting when they met round Crossland's supper table that night. He asked Crossland about it after they had gone.

'It's like this,' said the big man slowly. 'I go to the Methodys, like my mother way back in Kamloops taught me. But if Mr. Hetherington is away, I go to listen to the Father. And—there's nothing in it! They both says the same things as far as I can judge, only in different ways. And the ways don't signify, to my way of thinkin'.'

Not long after this some genuine excitement enlivened the little town one morning. The first

signs, as far as Nick could see, occurred among the Indians, who seemed to be looking out on the southern trail. He had learned by now that the Indians saw and heard things long before the other members of the community, but presently he saw Mathers join them, and he put down his chisel and trotted off to see what was going on.

Crossland left his shack; Trooper Curtis came out of the stable beside the station, where he had been attending to Maisie, his brown mare; Father Benet appeared from the church door; and every one sauntered towards the southern end of the town, towards which a dog-train could be seen approaching at great speed amid a flurry of snow.

From the distant sledge shouts and whoops could be heard, and presently Crossland cupped his hands and gave a great bellow in reply.

'Holà, Jean!'

'Holà! Holà! Holà! I come. Jean Latour come. I bring ze news. Holà!' replied a distant voice.

'Good old Jean,' chuckled Reuben Mathers. 'Wonder what the news is this time.'

'Wonder what his traps have done for him,' said Crossland. 'He gauges his time very nicely. The mail train comes in to-morrow, and he'll be able to get his pelts down to Regina without delay.'

'Who is it?' asked Nick, his eyes alight with interest.

'Jean Latour. Trapper,' said Crossland succinctly.

The huskies were trotting well. As the outfit approached, Nick saw that a string of a dozen dogs

was drawing a long sledge, on which were piled skins of all kinds, and on the top of them a strange figure was perched.

Jean Latour was small, swarthy, with long, sweeping black moustaches. He wore a coat and leggings made of skins, with fur inside, and with fringes and tassels wherever possible. He had a round cap in his hand, and was waving it madly, still uttering shouts, as the huskies careered down the trail. His hair was lank and black, but with a slight curl at the ends, and flowed nearly to his shoulders.

The sledge shot past the welcoming group at a surprising speed, and every one turned and began to run back towards the town. Jean Latour pulled up in the little enclosure by Martin Crossland's shack and leaped down from the top of the piled sledge. Leaving the dogs, who had dropped down, panting, in their harness, he ran back towards the party who had gone to meet him, and dropped on his knees before Father Benet, kissing the outstretched hand.

Then he sprang to his feet again and faced the group with flashing eyes.

'Ze ice breaks!' he cried excitedly. 'I tell you—I, Jean Latour—I haf seen it. It breaks below ze Athabaska, and ze river jams and jams. Soon it come here. I haf seen it. Great floes pile so high as a house—as two houses.'

'Say, that's grand,' said Crossland cheerfully. 'There's no sign of it here yet.'

'Not yet, no. But it vill come. I haf seen it. And I said if I am first wiz ze news I vill gif a

candle—two candles, eh, Father?—to blessed St. Anthony. And I am first wiz ze news, eh? Ze radio—it is nowhere, eh?’

‘Yes, you’ve beat the radio agin, Jean,’ chuckled Reuben Mathers. ‘What sort of pelts you got this time, eh?’

‘But ze beautiful pelts. Come and look. Father—I bring zose two candles to-night, eh?’

‘Very well, my son,’ said Father Benet serenely. They all went back to the enclosure, where Latour proceeded to free his dogs from their harness, feed them, and then began to display the skins he had brought in.

Nick was amazed to find that all the men had a very shrewd idea of the values of the skins, and Latour’s haul was universally acknowledged to be a good one. The skins were graded according to estimated value, and packed ready for transport: Crossland and Mathers helping with the grading, and several Indians doing the packing.

When Nick presently went back to join Horridge he found that individual pointedly taking no notice of the new arrival at all, and when the boy mentioned the skins he gave a sniff.

‘Boloney,’ he said curtly.

‘Well, he’s going to get some pretty useful dollars for them,’ said Nick with a grin.

‘Aw, shucks! What do folks want with them furs? Cloth’s good enough. I don’t set no store by furs.’

‘Ah, well, plenty of people do,’ said Nick, and went on with his job, conscious of the disapproval

of the ground engineer, which was principally directed against the flamboyant Jean Latour. It would be impossible for Horridge to approve of the French-Canadian.

Trooper Curtis, who had been out on a visit of inspection for several days, came in later that afternoon, and was interested to hear Latour's news about the ice.

'Jamming on the Athabaska, is it?' he said after whistling a few bars of 'Annie Laurie'.

'Great floes as big as a house—as a church—Latour says,' grinned Nick.

'Guess we ought to go down an' have a look,' ruminated the trooper. 'There's a few scattered cabins down those parts, an' if the floes are as big as you say there may be some danger.'

'What about letting me go down?' asked Nick eagerly. They were all in Reuben's store, with the smoky lamp alight and the door fast closed, and a smell of bacon pervading everything.

'You mean in your aeroplane?' asked the trooper thoughtfully. He whistled for a moment of two, while Crossland watched Nick in some amusement. 'I guess you might,' said Curtis after a pause.

'Are you hirin' my light aeroplane?' asked Crossland gently, 'or is Nick goin' up fer his own amusement and yours?'

'Come off it, Martin,' said Reuben, digging the big man heavily in the ribs. 'We all want to know, don't we?'

Curtis chuckled.

'That's it—you all want to know,' he said. 'I'll

take advantage of the plane going up, that's all. You wait a bit, Martin—flying hasn't started yet.'

'Only my joke,' said the big man good-naturedly. 'O.K., Nick. You go and make a survey to-morrow mornin', see?'

The door opened with a bang, and Latour entered, bringing an icy blast of wind with him, and a few particles of snow.

'He is snowin' again,' he said, clapping his hands on his sides to warm them. 'Rube, my ole frien', you haf some hot coffee, yes? I need the warming up inside.'

'Gee, I hope the snow stops,' said Nick with keen disappointment. 'I can't go up in a blizzard.'

'Go up? What for you go up? Where you go up?' demanded Latour.

'I was going up to see the cracking ice,' explained the boy.

'Going down, you should say. It is the south that cracks first, my young frien'. Go up and you see nothing but white—white everywhere. Go down and you see black streaks among the white, and that is deep water.'

'I meant go up in my aeroplane,' explained Nick, and the trapper seized the steaming cup of coffee held out to him by Reuben before he turned to answer.

'Ah, so! We go all new an' modern in Indian Leap, hein? This is you, is it not, my ole frien' Crossland? I see your hand in zis. Never are you satisfied wiz ze good old ways. Always it must be somesing new. Now I—I haf my dogs and my

sledge and I get my pelts. It is ze old way and I am satisfied. There is hundreds of dollars goin' sout' in ze train to-morrow. If I haf aeroplane what good does it to me? Nosings. Ze old ways are best.'

'If you guys will only stop gassing I'll turn on the radio, and see if they've got the news yet,' said Reuben, fiddling with the knobs of a very elderly wireless set that shared a shelf with a barrel of molasses. The set was always sticky, but that was the fault of the molasses, which apparently could not remember to stay in their own barrel and mind their own business. Reuben tuned in to a station that was giving dance music, and wiped his fingers on the seat of his trousers.

'Dern them molasses,' he said, but as he always said that after touching the radio, no one took any notice.

The conversation continued for some minutes while the saxophones droned unheeded. Then the music came to an end and a voice began to speak. At once talk was hushed and every head turned to listen to the news.

There was a good deal that was of no possible interest to them, but they listened to it all gravely. Then the announcer gave the weather report for the northern latitudes.

'A belt of warm air is sweeping the country, thawing out the rivers and lakes,' he said. 'The Athabaska River has shown signs of break-up as far north as the junction with the House River——'

'And farther! And farther!' said Latour excitedly.

'Sh—h—h—h——'

'——a big jam somewhere. Folks in the northern latitudes are warned to watch out, and shift their belongings if they live close to the banks of any of the big rivers. The pile ice may cause trouble to the unwary.'

The voice went on, but the men had heard all they wanted. They turned and grinned at Jean Latour.

'I beat him! By hours I beat him!' said the trapper proudly. 'Always I beat zis radio man. I, Jean Latour, am still ze best man in all Alberta, is it not so?'

CHAPTER VIII

AN AERIAL SURVEY

'FUNNY chap, that Latour, isn't he?' ventured Nick the next morning, as he and Horridge prepared the Fox Moth for flight, watched by Martin Crossland.

'Aw, he's nuts,' grunted Horridge.

'Latour funny? Is he?' queried Crossland with genuine surprise. 'I don't reckon he's funny, exactly. He's a dern fine trapper.'

'Yes, but I mean he boasts a good bit, doesn't he?'

'Now that's your Englishness comin' out,' said Crossland reprovingly. 'Why shouldn't he boast? All French-Canadians do. Most folks do too, I reckon. Latour's a dern fine chap.'

'What does he do?' asked Nick. 'I mean, where does he get those skins he brought in yesterday?'

'Traps 'em,' said Crossland with some amusement. 'Gosh! Aren't you English ignorant? He goes out hundreds of miles with that dog-sledge of his and sets his traps, and then he goes the round of them again and collects the pelts. That's what. Any more questions?'

'I got one,' said a new voice, and Trooper Curtis stepped forward. 'Got a radio on that bus of yours, Nick?'

'You bet,' grinned the boy. 'I had one fixed at Athabaska. I shouldn't care to fly passengers over strange country without a radio.'

'That's oke, then,' said the trooper. 'Now listen,

young Nick, I'll be right in that shack of mine with the station radio tuned in to any wave-length you like to mention, listenin' fer your voice. Get me? If you see anythin' you don't like the look of, call me up and we'll see what we can do about it.'

'Right you are,' said Nick.

'And listen—keep your maps beside you. I got a pretty useful set of maps myself, an' if you say somethin's happenin' just at so-an'-so, I shall know where to go, see?'

'I get you,' said Nick.

'How soon'll you be startin'?''

'Pretty soon now. I say, that snow cleared off quickly last night, didn't it? It seemed so funny to hear that announcer chap talking about waves of hot air, or whatever it was he said, and all the time there was a blizzard just outside.'

'Not a blizzard, sonny,' said Crossland with a grin. 'You haven't seen a blizzard yet. I admit there was a little powder snow, but nothin' to speak of. You'll find it's covered the trails a bit, but it wasn't nothin'.'

'Well, the sun's lovely now, anyway,' said the boy, peeling off his gloves and wiping his forehead. 'I just don't understand how it can feel really hot in the sun, as it does, and yet the snow shows no sign of melting.'

'You got a lot to learn,' was all the reply Crossland gave, and then Curtis called him to fix a wave-length upon which they could talk.

The boy found that the little plane took off gamely in about half the usual time, and realized

that the lift in the air must be excellent. He circled the little town once, and noticed that the slight powdering of snow the night before had succeeded in covering the roof of the hangar and its adjoining hut so that they looked as white as the rest of Indian Leap.

But he was not afraid of losing his way, for one of the things he had bought with great pride in Athabaska had been a wind-sock, and he and Horridge had erected it upon an immense pole, where it could be seen for many miles. The sock was bright red, and showed up well against the white snow. Nick was sure of finding his way back to Indian Leap with it floating over his aerodrome.

He had learned the look of trails from the air, and knew, too, that if he flew low enough he could keep to the course of the river. As soon as he was truly on his course he called up Curtis, and learned to his satisfaction that the trooper was sitting, as he had promised, close to the station radio.

He had been flying for approximately thirty miles when he first noticed dark cracks in the ice below him. Almost at once he realized that the smooth surface was smooth no longer, and that he must come down much lower if he wished to see what was really happening.

There were a few trees, of no great height, on the river banks, but no hills to be seen anywhere. Accordingly he dropped down until his altimeter told him that he was only eighty feet above the ground, and at this height he could see that very strange things were happening to the river.

'Hey, Trooper,' he called excitedly, 'the ice has broken here, and no mistake!'

'How far are you from Indian Leap?' was the reply.

'Forty miles now, I should think. I say! The ice is in great slabs, and it's riding up the banks and tilting up on end, and doing all sorts of queer things. It looks like slabs of concrete thrown about by an explosion.'

'Feels like it too, I guess,' was the response. 'Go on a bit, buddy, an' see how it looks lower down. An'—listen a minute—take in any little rivers you come across. See all you can.'

'I'm just over a little village now,' said Nick a moment or two later. 'All the folks are out of their shacks, watching the slabs of ice.'

'Are they in any danger?'

'I don't think so. None of the huts are built near the river bank. In fact, most of them seem to be just the other side of a belt of trees.'

'Guess that's an Indian settlement. They know that the trees will break the force of the ice if the floes should come up that far.'

'This looks like a spot of bother,' said Nick a little later on. 'I'm just over a junction of two rivers, and one, the smaller one, seems all iced up still, and the bigger one is forcing big slabs of ice all over it.'

'What's the trouble?'

'There's a little shack just at the bend, and the ice seems to be creeping up to it.'

'What are the folks doing?'

'I can see two or three little kids, but no adults at all. And the ice is creeping up. I saw a slab give a great jerk now, and one of the kids went running into the shack.'

'Is it near?' asked the trooper in an unemotional voice.

'Jolly near! Gosh! I should say if it goes on like this the shack'll be swept away in half an hour!'

'It's up to you then, Nick.'

'Eh? But what can I do? I couldn't get back to Indian Leap and—oh, I see. I'll have to land. Is that it?'

'I guess so.'

'Right you are. I say, the sun is glinting on the snow and making it look like diamonds, or something.'

'Don't look at it or you'll get snow-blindness.'

'How d'you expect me to land without looking at the snow? Talk sense, Trooper! Here we go! There—hear that?'

'No. What?'

'Screaming of the skis on the snow. We're down. Cheerio! I'll let you know what's happening as soon as I know myself.'

Nick got out of the plane, to find that his arrival had aroused only a fleeting curiosity in the children who were standing staring with fascinated eyes at the slowly approaching ice floes. The noise of the grinding and scraping was horrible, and every now and then a big piece, looking, as he had said, like a slab of concrete, would be thrown up out of the

jumble and advance some feet towards the doomed shack.

He shouted, but the children did not hear him. They had forgotten that the aeroplane had landed a short distance behind them, and were concentrating on the river. Nick advanced, and as he got near to them saw with horror that the youngest child was standing perilously near to a giant overhanging floe, which threatened to topple at any moment.

He sprang forward and grasped the child by its pinafore. She gave a shriek of fear and wriggled, but Nick lifted her bodily out of range just as the floe crashed down with a rending sound.

'Land sakes, Sally! You dern nearly stopped that one,' said one of the other children, a boy of about seven.

'Where's your father and mother?' asked Nick sharply, with one eye on the grunting, pushing ice.

'Pap's in there, sick,' said the boy, jerking his head towards the shack. 'Ma's dead a long time ago.'

'Well, keep away from that ice,' said Nick, and started towards the door of the hut.

'What you goin' ter do, boss?' asked the boy, while the other two children sidled up behind him.

'Take you out of this,' said Nick gruffly. He went in, and at once the appalling dirt and squalor of the place made him turn white.

'Pap's bin sick a good while,' piped up a little girl, smaller than the boy, but looking very bright.

'I'll say he has,' said the boy. 'Sis has bin lookin' after us. I chopped the wood, though.'

'That's fine, buddy,' said Nick softly. He approached a rough bed of skins and looked down at the unconscious figure lying on it. The man's face was flushed and his breathing was stertorous, and a rough growth of stubble on his chin made him look uncared for.

'What you goin' ter do, boss?' asked the boy again as Nick bent in perplexity over the recumbent figure.

'Carry him to the aeroplane, I guess,' said Nick. 'Look here, you kids collect up anything you want to bring with you, because I don't think you'll see this cabin again once the ice has finished with it.'

'I guess there won't be much cabin left when the ice is through with it,' said the boy solemnly, and the smaller girl broke into sobs at the words. The other girl began to comfort her, and the boy began to pick up odds and ends, while Nick lifted the sick man, and found to his great relief that he was neither big nor heavy.

However, even a man made light through illness seems heavy when he is carried for thirty yards over snow, and Nick was panting by the time he got him to the Fox Moth. The boy, whose name was Elmer, opened the door of the cabin, and then ran back for the skins that had served the family as bedclothes, with which to wrap up his father, as Nick strapped him into one of the seats.

The little girls trotted along behind him, their arms full of bits and pieces, and the boy, having



Nick was panting by the time he got him to the Fox Moth

put down the skins, ran back for a last look round the shack in case he had forgotten anything.

Nick, intent on getting the sick man comfortable, did not notice that the ice had crept very near indeed to the shack. The grinding noise was incessant, but suddenly the sound of a piercing scream cut through the other noises, and Nick wheeled as if struck.

A huge floe had been thrown up, and was now blocking the doorway of the cabin completely. That the boy was inside was clear, for his shouts sounded above everything, terror lending him strength of lungs.

Nick ran for the cabin. He could see that the floe was still moving almost imperceptibly, and that it would soon force the flimsy little building down. Wondering frantically how he was to get the boy out, he suddenly heard the piping voice of the elder sister behind him.

'The chopper, boss—the chopper!'

He saw it at once—a rusted implement lying beside the wood-pile that is near every Canadian shack. He snatched it up, and in a moment was hacking at a small window at the back, while the boy, realizing what was being done, did his best from the inside with a hunting knife.

'O.K., boss, I can git through now,' he chirped at last, and Nick put his arms through and seized the little body round the waist and dragged it to safety.

He fastened the three children firmly into the seats, and threatened them with dire vengeance if

they should tamper either with the straps or with the door. They promised, round-eyed, not to touch anything, and Nick then took off for home.

He had, of course, not switched off his engine while dealing with the children, or the oil would have congealed disastrously, but had left it ticking over. Even so, the cold had gained on it a little, and as he revved up it coughed once or twice.

Feeling that safety first must be his motto when he had passengers aboard, Nick taxied about the snow at three-quarter throttle until he was sure of his engine, and then eased back the stick for the take-off. The response was instantaneous, and in a moment the little plane was in the air, and Nick was giving Trooper Curtis a highly coloured account of the occurrence through the radio.

Before they were out of sight they saw the shack finally overwhelmed by the ice, and the children were rather sobered by this disaster to their home. However, by the time they reached Indian Leap the excitement of riding in an aeroplane had quite driven anything else out of their heads, and once their father was handed over to the care of Father Benet and his trained Indian nurses, they ran wild in and about the hangar until Martin Crossland said sarcastically that when he hired a pilot he had no intention of hiring a troupe of performing fleas as well!

CHAPTER IX

A RESCUE

It was amazing to Nick how the sick man and the children were quietly absorbed into the life of the community. There was no fuss; no anxious committees inquiring what should be done with them; Father Benet's hospital just took the father and Mr. Hetherington's school took the children—that was all there was about it.

Nick was bubbling with excitement and importance when he arrived with the Fox Moth and its burden, but after he had told his tale, and listened to the spate of reminiscences that it provoked, he realized that tremendous happenings were common in that part of the world, and great events were taken in their stride by quite ordinary men.

What *was* exciting, apparently, was the arrival of the weekly train, with its news, stores, newspapers, letters, and strangers. The whole population of Indian Leap was gathered on or near the station a full hour before the train was due to arrive, and when it was actually signalled the excitement was intense.

Nick had not been long enough away from civilization to get as excited as this over a mere train, but even he felt his pulse beating rather rapidly as the sound of the bell that every Canadian train carries slung high in the front came ringing over the snow. Clang-clang! Neither musical nor sweet was the bell, but it thrilled the hearts of the folk in the lonely places as it sent ahead the message

that the link with the outer world of civilization was coming.

The big engine, with its massive cow-catcher in front, puffed into the station, and the black conductor swung himself down from the platform at the rear and executed a tap-dance on the platform.

'Hot-diggetty-dog! We'se come. Hi, brudders, come an' git yer mail. Pawcils an' letters an' all fer de gents ob Indian Leap an' Fort McMurray. Doan hang around, brudders. Come an' git it.'

'Hand over them mail-bags,' said Martin Crossland, who was also post-master of the little town. He examined the seals, found them untouched, and signed the receipt proffered by the negro. Then he swung them on to his shoulder and set off for his shack.

Nick remained, fascinated by the scene. An Indian with a few lank feathers drooping from his hair, followed by a squaw with a papoose on her back, was heaving a blanket that contained all his worldly belongings on to the woman's other shoulder, after which he preceded her out of the station.

Four stalwart Mounties were being greeted heartily by Trooper Curtis.

'Howdy, Corporal!' he said, saluting and then shaking hands with a large, grim-faced policeman. 'Goin' up to Fort McMurray?'

'Yep,' said the corporal laconically.

'Fine. Come along to the shack and we'll get ye some coffee. On a job or just lookin' round?'

'Job,' said the monosyllabic corporal, following

the trooper out of the station. The other three fell in behind him, and their spurs jingled musically as their heavy tread shook the timbers.

'One or two of those chaps look like tramps,' said Nick, finding Reuben Mathers by his side.

'Wal, fer cryin' out loud!' ejaculated the storekeeper indignantly. 'We don't have no tramps nor hobos nor boot-leggers nor none of them gentry in this town. No, sir!'

'Sorry!' laughed Nick. 'Who or what are they, then?'

'Prospectors, mostly. They goes up to the diggin's, some of 'em, and others finds a likely-lookin' stream and washes it.'

'And—er—what?' asked Nick lamely.

'Washes fer pay-dust. You know—haven't you seen 'em washin' fer gold? You're just plumb ignorant, you know, buddy.'

'Guess I am,' sighed Nick, but with a twinkle in his eye. 'I see what you mean now, but it sounded funny at first.'

'Funny!' snorted Mathers.

'And—I say, who was that big Mountie that Curtis called corporal just now? He didn't seem to have much to say.'

'Corporal Banks? No, he don't say much. Thinks a lot though, or so they say. He's oke. If I done wrong I'd sooner not have Corporal Banks on my trail. Say!' he ejaculated suddenly as an idea struck him, 'what about gettin' the corp. to run over to England and straighten up about yer Dad? Guess he'd soon put them to rights.'

'I've got to save the money first, Rube,' sighed Nick.

'You're plumb right. Can't do nothin' these days without the pay-dust! Never mind, buddy—you'll get it. Ah, here's my load. Don't you want to give me a hand back to the store with it?'

Nick readily helped the storekeeper with his goods, which had just been unloaded from one of the vans. The old man checked over the stuff carefully and then gave a receipt. After that he and Nick loaded up a sledge with the goods and set off with them for the store.

After that day it was decided that Nick should go up in the Fox Moth daily to report on the progress of the break-up, and also to keep an eye open for any one needing help. As far as Indian Leap was concerned, there might be no change in the conditions at all, except that for a few hours at midday the boy found that he soon got hot, and that the oil was not so prone to freeze if left alone for a moment then.

It was true that the radio reports came in nightly as to the extent of clearing water, and also weather forecasts, but it pleased the citizens of Indian Leap mightily to think that they knew the state of their own rivers some hours before the news was made public on the radio. And on one or two occasions, when the announcer was a mile or two out in his statements, they howled with joy, and commissioned Mathers to write a letter to the radio company pointing out the error.

The weather was variable and the ice cleared

slowly. Nick flew many hundreds of miles in all directions on these survey flights, and found that he was getting to know the lie of the country pretty well.

At first when he arrived at Indian Leap, and for some time afterwards, he had thought that nothing but his compass and chart could ever save him from being totally lost. His wind-sock, which was visible for a good distance, was yet no good in bringing him home from a five-hundred-mile trip, and when everything was covered with snow it seemed quite impossible to fly except by direct reckoning.

But after a while he began to recognize certain landmarks, snow or no snow. A little hill, a belt of pines, a strangely shaped stream, all gave him a line on some course that led back to Indian Leap, and by the time he had been going up daily for a fortnight, he would have said that he could find his way back without compass or chart from anywhere in a radius of fifty miles.

He was flying one day on a south-easterly survey, towards the Buffalo Lakes. Here the thawing had been slower than on the Athabaska and Christina rivers, and the lakes lay white and still, although Nick knew that they would not now be safe to come down on with skis. This ice, although unbroken on the still lake waters, would be too thin in all probability to take the weight of the aeroplane. It was this danger, as well as others, that had led to the 'gentleman's agreement' referred to by Crossland, that commercial flying should not go on between certain dangerous dates.

Nick was about thirty miles from Indian Leap when he saw smoke. It might have been from a shack, or it might not. It seemed to be coming upwards through the still air in curious puffs and bursts, and he was by now enough of a woodsman to know that anything out of the ordinary might be a signal of distress.

He put the plane towards the smoke, and as he got nearer saw that there was a dark shape on the ground, a fire, and a man waving madly to him. He dived and circled, looking for a smooth place on which to land. Not for anything would he come down without a good look round, for he realized the danger of tree-stumps just under the surface of the snow, and how he might buckle up his skis in a moment if he was not careful.

As he circled he noted that the man below had a tent, and seemed entirely self-contained. Then he found the spot he wanted, flattened out, and landed.

'Gosh, pal, I'm glad to see you!' panted the man on the ground, running up to the plane and leaning on the fuselage. 'I bin here close on a week now.'

'What happened?' asked Nick, getting out of the cockpit and staring towards the little camp.

'My own fault,' said the man. 'Say—you'll take me off, won't you?'

'Of course,' said Nick, rather surprised at the question. 'Have you damaged your own plane, then?'

'Buckled the pontoons. But I'm out of juice, too. What happened was this. I took a trip up

these parts, thinkin' after the radio said the rivers was clearin' I'd be able to come down easy. But when I got up here rivers was frozen solid still, and here was me with pontoons fitted! There just wasn't nowhere I could come down. And I couldn't find no towns, and I guess I must have got off me course a bit. Anyway, it was nearly dark when the engine coughed, and so I put her down, shut me eyes, and held on tight.'

'Pancaked, I suppose,' commented Nick, looking at the crushed undercarriage. 'Best thing you could have done.'

'I think so, pal. But the shock killed my radio—dern it! I might have got in touch with some one sooner if that hadn't happened.'

'Radios don't stand up to much,' agreed Nick. 'Well, let's get going. You're pretty well equipped, aren't you? Were you going prospecting or something?'

The man stared at him and then laughed.

'Gosh, pal, you don't fly round these parts without a tent and a frying-pan and a rifle, do you?' he asked with a shocked note in his voice.

'I hadn't thought of it,' said Nick, colouring a little.

'Well, I'll say! That's plumb foolish, pal. You don't want to do things like that. Why, a thing like this might happen to anybody. Anybody might have to come down through no juice or engine going punk. And if you haven't got a tent an' a rifle an' a kettle, an' a few things like that, how are you goin' to live?'

'You're right,' said Nick. 'I guess I shan't go out like that again.'

'Look at me, here,' went on the man, evidently glad to have some one to talk to after a week on his own. 'Where should I have bin without my equipment? Look in here.' He held up the tent flap, and the amused boy saw a tiny stove, with the chimney projecting out of a vent in the canvas at the back, a bed of spruce boughs, a kettle, some beans and bacon in a pot, and a rifle.

'Is there room for you in there too?' he asked with a grin.

'Now don't get funny, pal,' said the man, with an injured air. 'There's plenty of room for me! Now we'd better get goin', as you said. Take as much as you can an' pack it in, will you? What we can't get in your plane I'll pack in the Stinson. It'll be safe enough there.'

The dismantling of the little camp did not take long. The man, who gave his name as Crosby, stamped out the fire before they left, and saw to it that his own plane, a small passenger-carrying monoplane of a more modern type than the Fox Moth, was securely battened down in case of storms.

'I guess you're not familiar with conditions up north?' queried Nick, feeling suddenly a man of vast experience by comparison with Crosby, who had expected the rivers to be thawed out thus early.

'Nope. I done a good bit of flyin', you understand, but all way down south. I'm an American, you understand, not a Canadian. My home town's

Chicago. And if you ask any one from my part of the world if they know Flier Crosby, they'll tell you a thing or two. Yes, sir! Now, let's scram.'

Making a careful note of the position of the wrecked aeroplane, Nick got into the air again with all speed, and continued his survey before taking his new acquaintance to Indian Leap. The man interested him, but he did not find himself entirely attracted towards him. He contrasted him with the men he had learned to know and respect within the last month: Crossland, Mathers, Father Benet, Jean Latour, and the trooper. This man was different. It might just be that he was an American and not Canadian. It might be something deeper. Nick found himself wishing that Crosby had not entered so unceremoniously into his new life.

CHAPTER X

PILOT CROSBY

AN hour after arriving at Indian Leap, Nick was heartily sorry that he had ever set eyes on Crosby. The man jarred. His geniality was forced and insincere, and it was soon apparent that the kindly inhabitants of the little town were far from pleased to see him.

He had got out of the plane as soon as Nick touched down, and inquired with a dissatisfied air what sort of a one-horse dump this was! On being told, rather shortly, that it was Indian Leap, he had brightened up, and asked to be shown Martin Crossland.

'Gee! The very man I was coming all this way to see!' he exclaimed loudly, holding out his hand to Crossland, who shook it rather reluctantly.

'That's fine,' said Martin without enthusiasm. 'What's your business up these parts?'

'Now listen, pal; I seen your name in the *Mercury*,' said the man, sitting familiarly down on the edge of the table in Crossland's shack. 'And I come after the job. I'm the best flier in the whole United States of America, and that's saying something! If you want pep and go and the big business outlook on this joint, well, you've come to the right man for it. And that's me. Flier Crosby. You're a lucky man, Crossland!'

'Is that so?' said Martin dryly. 'Unfortunately I'm fixed up with a pilot, thanks.'

'Some guy beat me to it?' ejaculated Crosby with

a scowl. 'Wal, if that don't beat the band! How'd he git here, then?'

'Flew, I guess.'

'Not that kid that brought me in just now?'

'Sure.'

'Now, look here, pal! You just can't do a thing like that to me! Listen a minute. He's only a kid, and I'm the man with the best reputation in all Americal'

'I hate to say it,' said Crossland with a slight grin, 'but you seem to have landed yourself in a jam, and the kid has kept out of jams up to now.'

'There's no call to rake that up,' said Crosby sulkily. 'I was unlucky, that's all. But I'll bet any money that kid hasn't got the experience I have.'

'Stop crabbing the kid!' said Crossland sharply. 'I've engaged him, and he's a jolly fine little flier. The job's filled, and that's all there is to it.'

'You don't have to shout,' said the man bitterly. 'But you'll regret it. How do I get out of this dump?'

'There's the door,' said Crossland, turning his attention to some papers and ignoring the new-comer.

'I mean how do I get away from Indian Leap?' snapped the man angrily.

'You're lucky,' said Crossland, still with his back to Crosby. 'The train comes in to-day—you can go by that.'

'Kind of you!' sneered the man, getting off the table and throwing open the door. He stiffened suddenly, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at an

advancing figure. 'What's that dern Mountie want?' he muttered.

'I don't know,' said Crossland, looking up in some surprise. 'I guess he's a friend of mine. Why?'

'Oh, nothing,' said Crosby. 'Guess I'll beat it, that's all.' He went out, closing the door quietly behind him, and took a path from the shack that did not take him near the trooper.

'Who's your friend?' asked Curtis as he entered the shack.

'No friend of mine,' grunted Crossland. 'Seems he's one of them real mean skunks. Young Nick picked him up, I gather, though I haven't heard the full story yet, and as soon as he gets here the guy tries to get the kid's job away from him!'

'Is that so?' said the trooper softly. He whistled for a moment or two without speaking. 'What did he say his name was?'

'Crosby. No end of a fine chap way back home, by all accounts.'

'You said it! And where is way back home?'

'Search me! Better ask him, Trooper.'

'I will,' said the trooper, moving with jingling spurs to the door. 'Guess I don't like skunks, neither,' he added.

Meanwhile Nick was arguing with Reuben Mathers about the correct equipment for enforced camping in the wilds. Mathers persuaded him to buy a gun, and promised to give him shooting lessons on condition that he told nobody about it. Mathers contended that it reflected great discredit

on his establishment that a young fellow should be lodging there who could not shoot. He declared with a sad shake of the head that he would never have taken Nick in had he known this dreadful secret.

'Rifle, ammunition, light portable tent, stove,' said Nick, counting his purchases on his fingers. 'Nothing else, is there, Rube?'

'Good idea to have a stove—but what about cookin' pots?' queried the old man with a smile.

'Oh, gosh! I forgot. Kettle and frying-pan, eh?'

'That'll bile yer water and fry flapjacks, but you want a pot fer pork an' beans,' said Mathers decidedly.

'Keep it as low as you can,' said Nick anxiously. 'You know why I don't want to spend more than necessary.'

'That's right, too,' said Mathers thoughtfully.

'What! A young fellow like you in debt?' guffawed Crosby from the doorway. 'Say, store-keeper, d'you keep any rye whisky here?'

'No,' said Mathers, eyeing the man with some disfavour. 'Shut the door after ye, stranger.'

'I'm not going,' said Crosby easily. 'Guess I've got an hour or so to fill in before the train comes. Why don't the kid want to spend money?'

'Cause he's got a wife an' seven kids to support,' said Mathers blandly. Nick, who was used to hearing the old man discuss his father's tragedy with all and sundry, was surprised that he seemed determined to keep it from the new-comer, and was very glad that this was so. Crosby scented a mystery

and frowned, but finding after a while that he could get nothing out of the storekeeper, he took himself off again.

Nick and Mathers came to an agreement on terms, and the boy carried his new purchases over to the hangar. Here he found the man Crosby making a nuisance of himself to Horridge. He had been prying and peering into the store shed and the hangar, and the ground engineer's patience went when he climbed into the cabin of the Belanca.

'Get to blazes out of that!' he roared.

'Who says so?' asked Crosby insolently.

'Me,' said the ground engineer succinctly.

'Who are you?'

'Who wants to know?'

'I do!'

'Well, stick around and find out!' growled Horridge, advancing threateningly.

'O.K., O.K., I'll get out of your punk aeroplane,' said the man angrily. He got out as slowly as he dared, one eye on Horridge's grim countenance.

'What's the matter?' asked Nick impatiently, throwing his purchases down in a corner of the shed and coming between the men. 'You're not exactly making yourself popular, are you, Crosby?'

'Little ray of sunshine, that's what he is,' growled Horridge. 'And I'll thank him to get out of my hangar!'

'I'm getting out, aren't I? Your hangar! Wonder

what Mr. Big Man Crossland would say to that, eh?’

‘Aw, git out,’ muttered Horridge, turning back to a plug that he was cleaning, and leaving the boy to deal with the stranger.

‘I think I hear the train,’ said Nick, gently shepherding the man out of the hangar and towards the station. A shadow fell across them from behind, and the voice of Trooper Curtis sounded quietly.

‘Hello, Nick, who’s your friend?’

‘He’s a pilot, name of Crosby,’ said Nick, wheeling round with a smile. ‘Hi! Crosby! Meet the trooper.’

The man, who had hurried on when Nick stopped, turned unwillingly with a forced smile on his lips. Nick noticed that his eyes were very watchful.

‘Glad to have you know me,’ said Curtis heartily, and Nick, glancing at him, was amazed to find that his eyes were as watchful as the pilot’s.

‘Pleased, I’m sure,’ said the man mechanically. Trooper Curtis whistled a little tune, and Crosby turned to go.

‘You up here for any reason?’ said Curtis suddenly, but quite pleasantly.

‘He was after my job,’ said Nick cheerfully. ‘Rotten luck that Crossland had picked on me first.’

‘I’ll say!’ said Crosby with a short laugh. ‘All my journey for nothin’.’

‘Got all your licences, I guess?’ suggested Curtis, gazing skywards. Crosby coloured angrily.

'What d'you think I am?' he shouted indignantly.

'Mind if I have a look?'

'What business is it of yours, Mountie? I ain't got the job, anyway. And I'm not flyin' here.'

'That's so,' agreed Curtis courteously.

'Well, keep yer paws off me!'

'Sure! But I'd be glad to know where you hail from, Mr. Crosby.'

'Know my name, do you?' growled the man, turning pale.

'Sure I do.'

'Well, perhaps you know all the rest too,' was the snarling reply, and the man turned on his heel and hurried towards the station, while Curtis pushed his Stetson to the back of his head, and scratched his scalp reflectively.

Nick kept close to Crosby until the train came in, and then he saw him into a carriage and kept talking to him until it moved out again. The flier took a new line just before the train left, suddenly suggesting that the boy would make better money, and have a better time generally, if he took a job down south and left Indian Leap. Nick grinned at this notion.

'What's the idea?' he challenged. 'You want to come here, don't you? If it's good enough for you, it's good enough for me.'

'You don't get me, pal,' said Crosby with an injured air. 'I don't want to take your job away from you. No, sir! But I hate to see a young fellow like you wasting yourself in a one-horse dump like this.'

Sure I'd take the job, but it would be doin' you a favour, see, for rescuing me.'

'Thanks, but I don't want any favours,' said Nick dryly. 'I'm quite satisfied here. And, anyway, you didn't seem to cotton on to any of the chaps here. What made you turn nasty with Trooper Curtis?'

'Aw, Mounties!' said the man with deep disgust. 'I hate the lot of 'em. When you get to my age, pal, you'll hate 'em as much as I do. Yep, I guess you're right, too—he knew my name, didn't he? Wonder how he got on to that.'

'Well, seeing that I'd shouted it out as he came up, it wasn't so surprising,' said Nick with a grin. The man flushed and growled something under his breath.

'Let me tell you something, pal,' he said grimly. 'Don't shout out strangers' names in front of Mounties, or any other brand of policeman, see? It ain't always healthy. So long!'

The train drew out of the station, leaving a slightly puzzled Nick standing on the platform. He repeated this conversation to Crossland a little later on, and the big man stared at him reflectively.

'Let me ask you, kid, to be careful who you bring back to this town another time,' he said caustically. 'I don't mind a load of kids whose home has bin crushed up by the floes, and I don't mind Injuns in moderation, or trappers or prospectors, or any of that sort of guy. But don't you bring another of Crosby's sort. He's a skunk, and he's yeller! Don't ask me how I know, because I can't tell you.'

But you see what Rube says, and Curtis. They all know. And when you've lived a bit longer in these parts you'll know too. Maybe that's what Rube means when he says we'll make a good Canadian of you yet.'

'Aw, shucks!' grinned Nick.

CHAPTER XI

ALL CLEAR

SHE 's crackin'!'

The stentorian bellow from Jean Latour brought Nick from his spruce bed early one morning. He sprang to the tiny window and tried to see what was going on. All he could see, however, was that several men were running down the main street towards the river, and he decided quickly that he would join them.

He hastily pulled on some clothes—not the city attire with which he had first come to Indian Leap, but an outfit bought at Mathers's store, warm, durable, and entirely suitable for the climate and work he had to do.

He crammed his fur cap down on his head as he ran down the ladder, and nearly collided with Reuben himself, who was also dragging on some clothes with the evident intention of joining the gathering outside.

'Wal, fer cryin' out loud!' the man said peevishly. 'If that dern river don't chose an onnatural time to crack!'

'What's happening?' asked Nick as they jog-trotted over the crisp snow.

'Didn't you hear Jean callin'?'

'Yes. Is it the river?'

'Of course it's the river. Crackin' here right under our very noses. There'll be sights on the waterfront to-day, boy!'

Every one in Indian Leap was on Crossland's

jetty, watching a wide black crack that was spreading across the river, widening and narrowing again as pressure from up-river brought the great floes against each other with the grinding noise that Nick remembered hearing when he rescued the children and the sick man from the doomed hut.

The big piece of ice on the south side of the crack starred suddenly into dozens of little cracks as something struck it from up-stream. Round the bend came an increased roaring, and the cracked piece of ice began to pile up on itself as the pressure increased. The wide crack narrowed suddenly and the black water flowed over the northern piece of ice as the floes began to rush upon it and pile up on its edge. Then there was a crack like a pistol-shot from down-stream, and a crack appeared there. The ice was breaking up rapidly.

The children were jumping up and down on the jetty, shouting with excitement, and their father, pale and thin after his long illness, leaned against a post and watched gloomily. Several Indian children watched with inscrutable faces, and their parents stood by, with an occasional grunt marking an expression of the greatest excitement.

Jean Latour was of course in a state of the wildest ecstasy, shouting and waving his arms as the big floes charged down on the rapidly piling-up ice, and shrieking his opinion to Crossland that the pressure on the jetty was more than the structure would stand.

'This jetty's stood a great many ice packs, Jean,'

said Martin with perfect good humour. 'It ain't goin' ter break under this one.'

'That is the spirit, dear brother,' said Mr. Hetherington cheerfully. He and Father Benet, both in Indian Leap together, as occasionally happened, were on the jetty, taking the liveliest interest in the behaviour of the ice.

A big floe poked its edge up, rearing high above Reuben Mathers's head as he stood at the southern end of the wooden structure. Nick shouted a warning, and he looked round with the utmost astonishment at the enormous dripping wedge that towered above him.

'Wal, fer cryin' out loud!' he complained bitterly, and moved away with slow deliberation. The floe, as if disappointed, sank back suddenly into the water again, sending up a shower of icy drops over the retreating Mathers and several Indians who were standing near.

The noise was terrific, for the great slabs of ice scraped and ground against the wooden piers of the jetty and against each other, and there was also a new sound, unheard in Indian Leap for some months—the lap and gurgle of the water, now out of its long prison.

Nick stood and watched the jostling floes for the whole of that day. The sight fascinated him, and he could hardly tear himself away. At last the ice had broken! Soon the rivers would be clear and summer flying would begin.

Next day the scene was a different one. The river raced by, black and sullen, with big white

patches on it as isolated floes swept past. The white covering had gone, and the boy recognized that the air was warmer. To his astonishment the oil did not show the same tendency to freeze.

For three more days the white floes drifted by, and then came a day when the river seemed free. Each night they had all listened to the radio account of the break-up, and when at last Nick went up for a survey he realized that the waters were clear for a good hundred miles north.

The face of the land was changing too, and fast. Roofs were looking patchy and roads were darkening. Nick knew with a bounding heart that soon trees would bud and the earth would flower, and the long icy winter give place to a glorious spring.

He had been careful to write every week both to his father and his sister, but he had only written once since his arrival at Indian Leap to Uncle Nicholas. He now wrote an exuberant letter, giving his impressions of the break-up, and was surprised to receive a letter a few days later containing a five-dollar bill.

'A most excellent little article, dear boy,' wrote Uncle Nicholas. 'I dressed it up a little, naturally, and the editor took it without a murmur. Naturally it went under my name—a name not unknown, dear boy, in the history of Canadian journalism—and of course I retained what was right and proper of the fee. You will not grudge me that, I feel sure! Watch your *Mercury* carefully and know the joy of seeing yourself in print!'

Nick, who had not intended the letter to be

regarded as an article, was nevertheless pleased with the five dollars, which went at once to swell the collection kept in an old tobacco tin in his suitcase with his best suit. He did keep his eye on the newspaper until he saw the article, which he forthwith showed with great pride to Martin Crossland, Reuben Mathers, and Mr. Hetherington. They were equally delighted with his unexpected literary ability, for the letter was very little altered, and presently he cut it out and put it with his treasures.

Every week he got a letter from Lou, telling him of the happenings at school, and showing that she, too, was meeting life bravely. Mr. Clayton, also, wrote occasionally, reporting that he was doing his best to collect evidence that would authorize the reopening of Mortimer Lester's case.

The Bellanca was now wheeled to the water on the trolley, and lowered on to its pontoons. It floated, tethered to a buoy away from the jetty, in case it damaged its wings against the wooden piles, and a small canoe was used to go backwards and forwards to it.

The Fox Moth was fitted with pontoons and also took its place on the river. Nick, who had never flown off or on water before, decided that he must get in some practice at once, and also felt that he had better use his own aeroplane for the first few trial flights.

There are certain limitations to river flying, and one is, of course, that one cannot always depend on the wind being either directly up-stream or down-stream, and a cross-wind is not the most desirable

vehicle for taking off in. However, the boy was lucky on his first few occasions, for the wind, although light, was steadily north, and he took off down-stream with perfect confidence.

The Fox Moth sat easily on her pontoons, and Nick's first mistake was to start up his engine without releasing the rope that bound him to the buoy. Aeroplanes on the ground can warm up their engines while standing still, chocks in front of their wheels, but sea and river craft must keep on the move all the time the engine is running. On this occasion the rope snapped like cotton, and the Fox Moth careered gaily up-river, with Nick scrambling somewhat hastily for the controls.

Fortunately the throttle had been set only a quarter open, and the plane showed no inclination to take off. Nick saw at once what he would have to do, and cruised about the wide river until he knew his engine was warm enough, and then turned into the wind to take off.

The plane came unstuck quickly and rose into the air at a steep climb. Nick circled once or twice and then dipped into a glide, throttling back his engine as he approached the water. It ran by, sullen and black, below him, and he wondered suddenly if he was going to judge the distance correctly. It was all so different from landing on snow or grass.

He managed it well, easing back the stick with a decided movement at the last moment, which brought the nose up slightly, and, as there was very little way on the aircraft, brought it down square on the pontoons with a slight splash. He

taxied down to the jetty, where Crossland and Horridge were watching him, and gave a whoop of triumph as soon as he was within earshot.

He did the same manœuvre three or four times, and then decided to try out the Bellanca. This was a different proposition altogether, for the big freight-carrier was naturally heavier to handle than the light Fox Moth, and Nick had a little anxiety in his heart about it. He had flown the craft on skis several times, but for the last week or two it had been out of action, as Horridge had been replacing the skis with pontoons, and therefore the boy had not flown it very recently. Now he knew that he must fly it on and off the water several times before setting out with freight, and this time he did not make the mistake of starting up his engine before he was quite ready for it.

He got off the water well, but was not so lucky coming down. The sun had come out suddenly and the water looked different. Little sparkles were coming off the ripples, and the general effect was confusing. Nick set his teeth and put down the Bellanca's nose into the landing glide, but he misjudged the distance, and failed to flatten out in time. Just a split second too late he pulled back the stick, but the heavier plane was more sluggish than the little Moth in answering to the controls, and there was a rending crash as the pontoons touched the water too fast and at the wrong angle.

With a mighty effort Nick was able to lift the Bellanca's nose before the propeller touched, and, switching off the engine hurriedly, he awaited de-

velopments. One float was apparently rather badly damaged, for there was a heavy list to starboard. The Bellanca floated slowly down-stream towards the jetty, while Horridge and Crossland hurriedly got into the canoe and paddled out to meet it.

'I—I'm fearfully sorry,' stammered Nick from the cabin window.

'That's O.K., buddy,' said Crossland gruffly.

'Stand by fer this rope,' shouted Horridge, preparing to throw a line to the fast-drifting aeroplane.

'Right you are,' said Nick. Horridge cast the rope with practised accuracy, and the boy caught it.

'Make it fast to the main strut,' called the man. Nick did so, and then the ground engineer and Crossland paddled for dear life, gradually hauling the crippled aeroplane towards the jetty.

Nothing more was said about the cause of the disaster for some time, for every one was busy remedying the effects of it. The Bellanca had to be hauled ashore on to its trolley once more, and there the starboard float was found to be crushed in, and full of water. The port float was crumpled a little but had not taken in so much of the river, this accounting for the list to starboard.

It was fortunate that there were spare pontoons in the shed, and Horridge and the boy worked hard to get them fitted. That evening the boy apologized again to Crossland for the accident, and hesitatingly suggested that he should pay for the damage he had caused.

'Aw, shucks!' growled the big man. 'I'm insured, ain't I? The insurance company'll pay for the new pontoons. And anyway, you wasn't to blame. Just let me know how many more floats you reckon to smash up before you're proficient in bringin' that Bellanca down, an' I'll get in a supply.'

Nick laughed, and thanked his employer for the kind way in which he took the whole affair. And he made up his mind that he would make no more mistakes in river landings.

Not very long after the accident the welcome news came over the radio one evening that flying might begin in the northern latitudes. Nick was jubilant. Already the river steamers had started running, and he was aching to get busy on his new job. He and Horridge went over every bit of both the engines with renewed care, making doubly sure that everything was ready for the summer flying season.

CHAPTER XII

AN INTERESTING TRIP

TROOPER CURTIS strode into Martin Crossland's shack one morning and perched his form on the edge of the table. Martin watched him as he sat there, whistling softly for a moment, but asked no questions, as he knew of old that it was impossible to hurry the trooper.

'That little plane of yours ready to take on a consignment, Martin?' he asked at last.

'Sure it is. What's the job?'

'Orders came through a short while ago,' said the trooper thoughtfully. "'Settlement up on Cree Lake in great distress—take a sledge and dog-train and make best time you can up to their relief.'" Well, I says to meself, what's wrong with the little plane? So what?'

'Good idea,' said Martin heartily. 'You'll be taking some stuff along up there?'

'That's the idea,' nodded Curtis.

'I'll give Nick a shout.' Crossland went to the door, which stood open nowadays, and, cupping his hands round his mouth, gave a bellow that rang across the river, and made Nick jerk his head up like a startled moose. He saw the two men standing at the shack door, and put down the screw-driver he was using.

'Looks like I've got a job on, Horridge,' he said. 'Will you fill the Fox Moth up with petrol?'

'O.K.,' grunted the man.

Nick set off towards the shack.

'How soon can you be ready to fly?' asked Martin as the boy ran up.

'I knew it was a job!' grinned Nick, eyes ablaze with excitement. 'We can start as soon as the engine's warmed. Say twenty minutes.'

'Good lad,' said the Mountie with a smile. 'How did you know it was a job?'

'I don't know,' said Nick, grinning hard. 'Just the way Martin shouted, I guess. What is it, Trooper?'

'I want you to fly me an' some gear up to Cree Lake Settlement,' said Curtis quietly.

'Cree Lake. Where's that?'

''Bout a hundred and fifty miles away. But I thought you knew the district, buddy!'

'I guess I know up to a hundred miles in any direction,' said Nick cheerfully. 'But I haven't struck Cree Lake yet.'

'Come over to the post when you're ready, and I'll show you the map,' said the trooper after whistling a few bars. 'How's your navigation?'

'Pretty good!' grinned Nick.

'That's the stuff! Well, I must be gettin'. I got to get my stores together.'

Nick, remembering what he had learned from Crosby, put his camping gear into the cabin of the aeroplane, and then got into his flying kit. He saw that Horridge had put in plenty of petrol, and he knew that the engine was in first-class trim. He started up and cruised gently round the lake for a while, and then brought the plane to the jetty, and switched off the engine.

Horridge caught the line flung to him by the boy, and the little aircraft swung out into the current, tethered from the lower wing to the post round which the ground engineer was winding the line. Then the man brought the canoe forward and Nick went ashore to find the trooper.

'D'you want all that stuff taken aboard?' he asked cheerily, seeing Trooper Curtis scratching his head as he gazed at a pile of various sorts of stores. 'Say, what is this racket, Trooper?'

'Keep quiet a minute while I check over this gear,' said Curtis gruffly. 'Hi, Rube! Didn't I say tinned milk?'

'You sure did,' admitted the storekeeper, trotting off towards the store.

'Gosh old hemlock,' growled the trooper, 'he'd forget the nose off his face if he didn't watch out.' He began to whistle softly as he turned over the things in the heap beside him.

'What are we taking tinned milk for?' asked Nick in some perplexity. 'What's going on, Trooper?'

Curtis straightened himself, pushed back his Stetson in a familiar gesture, and scratched his head.

'It's like this, buddy,' he said quietly. 'Up north there's lots of little settlements, like this one we're goin' to on Cree Lake. Sometimes they're all Indians livin' there, an' sometimes there's some whites as well. But whichever it is, sometimes they all gets sick, or the traps don't pay, or somethin' goes wrong anyway, and we gets to hear about it, an' Head-quarters says to take a dog-train up an' get 'em over their trouble.'

'I see. You're not after a murderer, then,' said the boy with some disappointment.

'Not this time, buddy. Ah, here's Rube with the milk. Let's get this lot aboard and snap out of it.'

They packed the load into the cabin of the Fox Moth, leaving very little room for the trooper, and most of the occupants of Indian Leap came down to see them off. Father Benet was not there, and neither was Mr. Hetherington, for both these men went off on rounds of visits that sometimes took them weeks, just as Jean Latour, who was also absent, went off to visit his traps. But Crossland, Mathers, and several Indians and trappers were on the jetty as Nick clambered into the cockpit, fastening his flying helmet on securely as he did so.

He was about to start up the engine, when a sudden thought struck him, and he leaned out of the cockpit and tapped on the cabin window, which was below and well in front of him. Curtis poked his head out at once.

'Say—you'll find a speaking-tube and earphones in there,' said the boy. 'You can direct me if I go wrong.'

'I meant to show you on my map where we're goin',' said the trooper, with a frown at his own forgetfulness.

'That's all right. I've found Cree Lake on my chart. I guess I can make it, and then you tell me where to go for the settlement.'

'O.K.,' said the Trooper briefly, and withdrew his head.

Nick signalled to Horridge to throw off the line, and started up his engine. The little plane was soon off the water, for there was plenty of lift in the cold air, and the boy set his course north-east for Cree Lake.

Meeting a slight contrary wind, the journey took them nearly two hours, during which time Nick chatted to Curtis through the speaking-tube, and heard how the news of the trouble at the settlement had come to the Mounties. Apparently a Canadian trapper had arrived there, to find half the population ill and the rest half-starved, and after sharing his meagre provisions with them, had hurried to bring the news to the nearest police post, where it was wirelessly to Head-quarters.

Cree Lake was in the area under Corporal Banks, who happened to be at Fort McMurray when the news came through. He at once detailed Trooper Curtis to deal with the situation, which sadly enough is a fairly common one in the northern latitudes, among the shiftless Indian population.

Now help was speeding up to the unfortunate people, hours before they could have hoped that it would arrive; and Nick began to feel that the trip would be interesting after all, although he would have preferred something more thrilling, such as the arrest of a gangster.

The lake was gleaming greyly before them as Trooper Curtis began to give the final instructions for finding the settlement. Nick was amazed to find, as he circled lower, that the hundred and fifty miles had made a great difference to the climate.

He had left Indian Leap in the budding of spring, with green things poking up and the snow melting fast. Here on Cree Lake everything except the grey water was still white.

The settlement, a huddle of shacks and huts, loomed into view, and Nick put down the Fox Moth towards the water. He circled once or twice, looking down anxiously, for he had heard tales of half-submerged logs near the shores of lakes and did not want to hole one of his floats so far from home.

He got down safely, and brought out the small boat with which they would reach the shore. It had to be inflated, and while he was dealing with it two canoes shot away from the bank, where a small crowd of apathetic children had gathered, and two Indians paddled up to the aircraft.

Nick saw that their dark, sullen faces brightened up incredibly as soon as they saw the trooper, who was leaning out of the cabin window, taking stock of the scene.

'Hello, Red Feather,' said Curtis genially, as the first man came alongside. 'What's bin going off here?'

'Firewater,' said the man, with an expressive grunt.

'That so? Who brought it in?'

'I do not know. A man—a white man—came at the beginning of winter and took one of our shacks. He had firewater with him, and he gave some to our young men if they would show him where to find gold. After that no luck came to our village.'

'It never does,' said the trooper curtly. 'Take me ashore, and send some one for the gear.'

The second Indian invited Nick into his canoe, and the boy took the rope with which he was going to tether the plane, and got in. As soon as they arrived at the shore he fastened the rope to a tree-stump.

'As long as we don't get a wind that blows her on-shore, she'll be all right,' he said to the trooper.

The unpacking of the Fox Moth took place while the trooper stood on the bank, with a growing crowd of miserable-looking people around him. When the stores were all brought to him, he set a couple of Indians to keep guard over them, and then accompanied the man he had called Red Feather on a tour of inspection.

Everywhere was evidence of neglect, and presently the trooper turned to Nick, who was walking just behind him.

'See what happens when white trash come here bringing drink!' he said sternly. 'First of all the men get lazy and don't set their traps, and then there's no food, so they drink all the more to forget it! Then, when they're flat out, they send for us. But meanwhile the guy who's responsible for it has skipped.'

Presently he came to a large hut set in the centre of the village, and here he halted.

'Clear this hut,' he said abruptly.

'This is the council hut,' said Red Feather slowly.

'I said clear it,' said Curtis evenly. 'And don't

keep me waiting! Set your young men to the job. Every one who can stand must help.'

'That is squaws' work. I will call them', said Red Feather. 'The young men cannot do squaws' work.'

'The young men will do as I tell them,' said Curtis coolly. 'I want this hut cleared for the sick, and I want this small one at the side cleared for my stores.'

'Your stores!' said Red Feather slowly. 'We need the stores, but we can do without your help, White Brother.'

Nick edged a little closer to the Mountie. He was amazed at the trooper's unruffled attitude. The Indian, tired of the privations of the winter, was reckless enough to throw discretion to the winds, and take the stores, murdering the white men, if he wished. Those of his men who were not ill crowded round, their hungry eyes roaming eagerly over the two who seemed to stand between them and the food they wanted.

'Get a move on!' said Curtis abruptly, as if the other had not spoken. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Red Feather and forced the man to drop his gaze. Then he turned his back on him and faced the Indians.

'I want this hut cleared,' he said, not raising his voice in the slightest, but with a new note in it that cut like a knife. 'Jump to it!'

Before Red Feather or any one else could utter a protest, the work was being done. Several of the braves still stood indecisively in little groups, but

Trooper Curtis ordered these to bring the sick to him, and got them moving before they could make up their minds to resist. As the work went on the thought of resistance faded from their minds, and they got on with the task steadily.

'Now we'll get the stores in,' said the trooper, when a start had been made. 'Guess I may have bin foolish to leave just those two guys in charge of all that stuff.'

However, they found when they reached the shore that all the able-bodied population had followed them to the council hut, and the only thieves that the guards had had to contend with were the children.

Nick was filled with admiration at the way the trooper handled the affair. He kept all the Indians who were at all well on the move all the time, fetching and carrying, and announced presently that he wanted a council fire.

The braves and squaws went off into the forest to gather wood, and a huge pile of branches began to grow in the space in front of the council hut, as Trooper Curtis went in to look at his patients

CHAPTER XIII

A CONSIGNMENT OF PELTS

NICK soon found himself so busy that he had not time to think. Trooper Curtis laid aside his Stetson, took off his coat, and got down to the task before him with a thoroughness that compelled admiration. Nick hurried backwards and forwards, opening tins of milk, heating water, and at last even feeding small brown babies with a spoon.

Most of the ills were due to lack of food, and the thin little infants, gazing up at him with big dark eyes, filled him with pity. He thought once of Lou, and how she would have enjoyed herself playing at dolls on a large scale, but he was too busy to do much thinking, for the trooper was snapping out orders continuously.

There were several of the men ill, too, and these the trooper attended to carefully as soon as he had seen the children settled. Nick was to learn that Curtis had a very soft spot for little Indian babies, and the trooper was deeply angry with the men through whose fault they had come to this pass.

There were wounds and sores to be dressed, and several cases of bronchitis and pneumonia among the squaws. It appeared that the women, alarmed by the lazy habits of the men due to the firewater, had attempted to set the traps, with no result but trouble to themselves.

It was dusk when the last of the patients had been seen to, and the council fire was lighted. The flickering flames shone into the hut where the



*'Red Feather is your chief?' he asked, sitting down on a tree-stump
in a negligent attitude*

sufferers lay, illuminating the drawn faces with its weird glare. Trooper Curtis looked at the row upon row of silent eyes watching him, and went out to preside over the council he had called.

'Red Feather is your chief?' he asked, sitting down on a tree-stump in a negligent attitude. He had resumed the parts of his uniform that he had laid aside when attending to the sick folk, and now looked as spick and span as if nothing out of the way had happened at all.

'That is so,' said one of the older men.

'Sit by me, Red Feather,' said Curtis gravely. The man came forward rather sulkily. He had not forgotten that his power had been set at naught when the Mountie first arrived. There was a long silence. Curtis drew out his pipe and filled it in a leisurely way. Nick watched him anxiously. As far as he could see, there was no anxiety at all on that placid face, looking almost as brown and lean as those Indians around him. There seemed to be some obstruction in the trooper's pipe, for he fiddled and poked at it, every eye on him, for quite some minutes. Then he smiled and lifted his head from bending over it, lit it, and drew several puffs with evident pleasure.

Still no word was spoken. Nick began to feel that something must happen, some one must shout or something, to end the tension. Then the trooper took the pipe out of his mouth and began to whistle softly. The tune was 'Annie Laurie'.

'You have called a council,' began Red Feather, upon whom the silence was bearing hard.

'Ah, yes,' said the trooper slowly. 'So I did. Listen to me, all you braves. I am caring for the sick. To-morrow all those who are well will go out and set their traps. Those who can shoot will go out and get meat.'

'There is no meat. The forests are empty,' said Red Feather sullenly.

'Is the Indian no longer a mighty hunter, as his fathers were?' asked Curtis, drawing slowly at his pipe. 'I have been told that in the old days no Indian let his squaw and papoose go hungry, for he could always find something to kill. They were great men in those days. But I suppose those days are gone.'

'Those days are not gone!' growled a young brave whose vanity was evidently affronted by this remark. 'I will get some meat to-morrow. I am a better hunter than the old men.'

'Good,' said Curtis indifferently. 'And there is another little matter. Is there any firewater left?'

'No,' said Red Feather hastily.

'Bring it to me,' said Curtis without looking at him. For a moment no one moved. 'Bring it to me,' repeated the Mountie. His keen eyes flashed up and scanned the circle of faces illuminated by the firelight. Three or four of the men slipped away, and presently some jugs containing the fiery liquid were put down before him.

'It was you who told me that firewater was the cause of your trouble, Red Feather,' said the trooper in a low voice, unheard by the men

standing around. 'Why did you not wish to give this up to me?'

'It is only a little,' muttered the man. 'It is when they take too much that it drives them mad.'

'Who is to say what is too much?' asked the trooper softly. Suddenly he stood up, seized the jugs, and jerked their contents on to the fire. There was a rush and a roar as the flames caught the crude alcohol and transformed it into a blue flame. Then the trooper sat down again quietly. 'And now, where are the men who brought it?' he asked.

'Gone,' said many voices, and this time Curtis did not dispute the answer, for there was a ring of truth about it that convinced him.

For a moment or two longer they sat in silence. Nick was beginning to feel very sleepy after all the excitement, and very hungry too. But suddenly he noticed that the trooper was listening hard, and then he realized that the Indians saw it too, and were also listening.

'Some one is coming,' said Curtis. 'Is it the fire-water bringer?'

'I do not know,' said Red Feather with a look of perturbation.

'Keep silence and let him approach.'

Then Nick, too, heard footsteps crunching over the snow, and the squeak of the runners of a sledge. Presently a shout came through the night.

'Hi! You Injuns, thar! There's help comin'.'

'It is the white man who was here yesterday,' said Red Feather with a look of relief.

'Oh, the guy who gave notice to the police post,'

nodded Curtis. He stood up, his red jacket illuminated by the firelight, as the new-comer and his dog-sledge came into the circle.

'Well, if it ain't a goldarned Mountie!' ejaculated the man in amazement. 'How d'you git here, chum? I only give notice about these guys last night.'

'I flew up,' said Curtis, scanning the man closely, and liking the look of his honest, rugged face.

'I'll say! I don't see your wings, pardner! Straight now, no stringing. How d'you git here so soon?'

'I tell you—I flew up,' grinned Curtis. 'Aeroplane,' he added, seeing the look of incredulity that greeted his statement. The man grinned.

'Guess I'm behind the times,' he said frankly. 'I figured no one could git here fer some days, so I picked up some caribou meat and come along back. Guess I'm too late, eh?'

'Decent of you,' commented Curtis.

'Aw, shucks! They was hungry, poor critturs. Well, guess I'll shake down here fer to-night an' git on me way to the towns to-morrow.'

'Got a good haul?' inquired the trooper.

'I'll say I have! Every trap a winner. Guess I shall pull off a few dollars fer this little lot when I git 'em to Regina, buddy.'

Little more was said that night. The council broke up, and Curtis and Nick elected to sleep in the store hut near the big hut where the sick people were lying. Everything was very quiet.

The Indians were tremendously overawed by the power of the trooper's quiet personality, and Nick recognized that they would not dare to disobey him now.

Curtis, however, decided to remain in the settlement for some days, to make sure that everything was going on well, and in the morning, as they all sat over some food, he asked the trapper if he would sell his sledge and dogs.

'Sell my outfit?' The man stared at him. 'Why, buddy, how d'you reckon I'm going to git to Regina if you take my dogs and sledge?'

'Same way as I came up—fly!' said the trooper laconically. 'The plane's out there on the lake, and Nick here is the pilot. You'll save days, and the charge ain't much, considerin'.'

'Seems like I'm gettin' modern in me old age,' grinned the man. 'Shucks! I never thought to see meself in one of them things! Guess I'll try it, buddy. Can you git my pelts aboard?'

The pelts were carefully placed in the cabin of the Moth, and the transfer of the sledge and dogs arranged. Then Nick got his passenger into the cabin, told him on no account to try to open the door, and started up the engine.

The Indians who were not already in the forest setting their traps lined the banks of the lake to watch him go. The last thing Nick saw as he circled above the little settlement was the scarlet jacket of the trooper among a dun-coloured mass of Indians.

It had been arranged that Nick was to fly the

trapper to Indian Leap, where he would get the train down to Regina. He had discussed with Trooper Curtis what he should charge for the trip, and the trooper, with plenty of experience of all sorts of travel to guide him, had suggested a sum, which had been agreed upon. Accordingly, after an hour and three-quarters in the air the boy dropped down on the river near the jetty, and helped his passenger to unload and get his pelts to the station. He wanted to get everything fixed up and finished entirely on his own, without having to ask Crossland for help.

The man sorted his pelts carefully and packed them for the train journey. Then he turned and handed a small silver fox pelt to the boy.

'There you are, buddy!' he said.

'Er—what's this?' asked Nick in astonishment.

'That's the pay for the trip,' said the man, busy once more with his packing operations.

'But—but——'

'That's O.K., buddy! I know it's a bit more nor you asked for, but you can't be too accurate with pelts. You're welcome, anyway! Now, I guess I'll find the store and get me some food. Up Main Street, is it?'

'Er—yes,' said Nick dazedly. The man stumped off, and the boy, after hesitating a moment, went into Crossland's shack with the pelt over his arm.

'Hello, Nick!' said the big man genially. 'I saw you'd got back. What have you been doing all this time? Did you have a passenger?'

'Yes,' said the boy slowly. He took a deep breath.

'I guess I've been a fool,' he said.

'Why? What's the racket, buddy?'

'I—I wanted to manage it all without coming to you for help. And instead of paying me the money we decided on he gave me this!' Nick held out the silver fox pelt.

'Well, what's the matter with it?' asked Crossland, examining it closely. 'Looks a good enough pelt to me.'

'But don't you mind taking it instead of money?'

'Gosh, no! Why should I? It's good value. You don't want to worry about that, Nick. That trapper done quite right. You get paid in all sorts of strange things up north, you know. Sort of barter business, I suppose you'd call it.'

'Well, I'm glad I haven't been the cause of you being done out of anything,' said Nick with a grin of relief.

'Say, you don't want to think you're going to be done,' said Crossland reprovingly. 'Most folks is honest—up north, anyway. If you come across a real wrong-un you can usually tell. That guy you brought here—Crosby—struck me an' some of the others as being a bit of a wrong-un, but we don't get many of 'em.'

'I always thought there were lots of crooks up in this part of the world,' said Nick thoughtfully.

'Ah, like some of us think Englishmen are not so good! You see what it is. Curtis hit the nail on the head when he said it was films. You see a film, or read a book, an' ever after you think people are like the characters you've seen or read about.'

'Course, we get bad men at times, but not so many. Used to be more in the old days, but the Mounties put them where they belonged.'

'They're pretty good, aren't they?'

'Sure they're pretty good. An' I'm not saying the boys don't get a bit rough at times. You get a bunch of cow-hands on the spree, or miners down with their pokes full of pay-dust, an' maybe you'll get a bit of rowdyism and shootin'. But on the whole I'm telling you the north is honest. They might shoot you fer fun, but they wouldn't cheat you out of half a dime.'

CHAPTER XIV

NORTH AGAIN

NICK now found himself surprisingly busy. The fame of Crossland's airport had spread rapidly, and the train that took the trapper south to Regina brought up a number of folks who wished to fly on to their destination. There were two nuns and a Mountie who wished to go to Fond-du-Lac, on the north-eastern bank of Lake Athabaska, some two hundred and seventy miles away. There were also some stores for the same place. The Mountie spread out his map and pointed to the little town.

'If you follow the river all the way you can't go wrong,' he said.

'I guess I can do better than that,' said Nick. 'If I follow the river it'll take me out of my way. I'll cut straight across country and fly by my compass.'

'So long as you get us there, buddy,' said the Mountie, folding up his map, 'I don't give a dern how you do it.'

The Bellanca had been repaired since the accident to the float, and Nick had practised many take-offs and landings with the big freight-carrier. He was now confident of his ability to deal with larger loads than the Fox Moth could carry, and packed the party for Fond-du-Lac into the bigger aircraft.

The nuns were quiet little Frenchwomen who did not speak much, and who seemed rather nervous of the idea of flying. However, the

Mountie seemed to take it so much as a matter of course that they took heart. Crossland stood on the jetty and watched the boy take off, a smile on his face.

'He's a grand lad,' he said to Mathers, who was beside him.

'You're dern right,' said the storekeeper with emphasis.

The Bellanca was easier to fly than the Fox Moth in one particular, and that was the pilot's position. In the Moth he was perched in an open cockpit behind the passenger cabin, but in the Bellanca he sat up in the nose, with the passengers behind him. The noise was not so terrific, and he could carry on a conversation with them without using earphones. Of course he had earphones with him, but they were for radio-telephony, and the noise inside the aircraft was little more than is experienced inside a fairly old saloon car.

As hour followed hour the aeroplane thundered northward. This was the longest stretch Nick had done, but he was far from being bored by it. There was not much variety below to look down upon, and there was certainly none in the heavens, which were clear blue without a cloud showing anywhere. But from time to time they caught sight of the broad Athabaska River, when one of its curves brought it into range of their vision, and there was always the alternation of forest and prairie, little hills and rocky valleys, snowdrifts and clear spots where the snow had gone, to make variety.

Lake Athabaska is over two hundred miles long from west to east, and Fond-du-Lac is on one of the narrowest parts of the eastern extremity. In places the lake is about fifty miles wide, but it narrowed to about five miles opposite the little town. Even that is wide enough, and as Nick circled down to land he became aware that he was up against another difficulty. The water was like glass, and the sun was shining in such a way as to throw up a glare that was almost blinding. As he came cautiously lower he realized that he could not tell how near he was to the water. There was nothing to tell him, for the lake was so clear that he could see the bottom, and that might have meant extreme shallowness. On the other hand, he could see fairly large fish swimming about, and that seemed to argue that it must be fairly deep.

'What's the trouble, kid?' asked the Mountie suddenly.

'It's a bit difficult to gauge height,' said Nick, going round in a flat spin and trying to make up his mind to come down.

'Hm. Don't look too easy,' said the man cheerfully. 'Why don't you chuck something out and see how long it takes to get down?'

Nick chuckled softly with relief.

'You've got it, brother!' he said, using the intonation he had heard Reuben Mathers use on occasions. 'Pass me one of the cushions from the spare seats, will you?'

'Oke,' said the man, throwing over one of the square leather cushions. Nick caught it neatly,

opened the window nearest to his head, and threw the cushion out, watching its fall anxiously.

It spun round in the air and dropped rapidly. Nick gathered that he was higher than he had thought, and put the Bellanca's nose down. He dived at a shallow angle, keeping the cushion in sight, until he saw by the ripples that it had struck the water. Now he had his distance, and watched the floating object until he judged it right to pull back the stick so that the plane sat down comfortably on the water.

The manœuvre was executed excellently, and the Mountie grunted a compliment as the boy taxied towards the jetty, where two men were launching a boat to go out to meet them. Nick said airily that it was nothing, but he surreptitiously mopped his brow, and made up his mind that a consignment of cushions should always accompany him in future.

The Bellanca was tethered, and the men in the boat took off the passengers and then returned for the goods. Nick went ashore to look at the little town, and found it very different from the settlement on Cree Lake, and different, too, from Indian Leap. It was a typically French-Canadian town, and a church and convent dominated it from the top of a little hill, with a forest of spruces behind it. The streets were orderly and picturesque, and the boy formed the idea that many of the log cabins had stood there for generations.

Several priests in fur coats over their long soutanes, with wide shovel hats on their heads,

passed him, and one asked him if it was he who had brought the plane in. Nick replied in the affirmative, and was instantly pressed to come and take some refreshments at the presbytery.

This the boy was only too glad to do, for he was stiff and hungry from the hours in the air, and wanted nothing so much as to stretch his legs and satisfy his hunger. The priest, a stout, red-faced man, led him up the hill towards the church, and as they went asked him various questions about where he came from and so on.

When Nick mentioned Father Benet the priest's face lit up at once.

'But he is a good man!' he exclaimed. 'In his day no one was his equal with the snow-shoes. Tell him that you met Father Lestrangle in Fond-du-Lac, and see what he says!'

Several men of various kinds were entering a fairly big well-built house as Nick and the Father came up. Nearly all were dressed much in the same way, with rough fur coats, evidently made from trapped animals. Some were priests and others seemed to be trappers and prospectors, but all seemed in search of the same thing—a meal.

Talk was general during dinner, and when it became known that Nick was a pilot, several heads were lifted interestedly, and presently a youngish man, square and with toil-roughened hands, leaned towards him.

'Say—where are you goin' next?' he asked earnestly.

'Back to Indian Leap,' said the boy. 'Any use to you?'

'No.' The man leaned back with some disappointment showing by his manner.

'Why—did you want to go anywhere?'

'Me an' my mates want to go to Waterfound River,' he said slowly. 'We've bin told there's gold there.'

'There's gold on Waterfound right enough,' said another man. 'But—it's a long river!'

'That's so,' agreed the first man. 'Maybe we can git some other way. But it just come to me that if we was flyin' we could go on till we saw the diggin's, an' then come down. If we're foot-sloggin' it's not so easy.'

'Where is this Waterfound River?' asked Nick. 'It might be on my way. But I should have to charge you passenger rates, you know. It isn't my bus, and I'm responsible to Martin Crossland for the hire of it.'

'Have you got a map?' asked the first man, disregarding the last part of the sentence.

'Sure!' Nick pulled his precious book of charts out of his pocket and opened it at the page that showed Alberta.

'That ain't no good—we're in Saskatchewan now,' said the man. Nick turned to another page, and the man put a stubby forefinger down on a place that seemed to be about a hundred and twenty miles south of Fond-du-Lac. Nick did a short calculation and mentioned what it would cost them. The men discussed it among themselves

for a moment and then announced that the deal was on.

'Well, as I've got to get back to Indian Leap after I've dropped you, I guess we'd better be going,' said the boy. He thanked Father Le-strange for his hospitality, and the little party went down to the lake and embarked on the Bellanca.

With his chart beside him, Nick dropped southwards until he reached the Waterfound River. He then followed its course as it flowed south-west towards Cree Lake, while the men crowded anxiously at the windows, watching for the huddle of huts that would show them that they had reached the diggings.

Nick flew at five hundred feet. He was flying over the river and visibility was good, so there was no danger in flying so low. Presently one of the men gave a yelp of delight and pointed to where a cluster of shacks went right down to the water's edge, and where a number of men could be seen engaged in some pursuit which so enthralled them that they did not hear the approach of the plane until it was practically overhead.

Nick came down gently on the water and dropped the anchor to which the Bellanca was tethered on occasions like this. Then he brought out the collapsible boat, inflated it, and the men jostled forward to tumble in.

'I can't take the lot of you—the boat's too small,' grinned Nick, and they laughed and proceeded in a more orderly manner. It was evident that they were extremely excited at the prospect of reaching

the diggings, and Nick was no less thrilled with the idea of seeing gold being mined for the first time.

He accompanied the leader up to a little saloon which was built on what would one day be called Main Street, between the shacks. Here, in a dirty bar with bottles and glasses everywhere, the man asked where he could register a claim when he had staked it.

'Right here, buddy—right here,' said the man behind the bar with a grin. 'I got a licence to register claims. An' I'll give you a tip—up by the creek yonder they're all pannin', an' round by the end of the shacks they're diggin', but if you take my tip it's the pannin' that gets the stuff.'

'Is panning the same as washing?' asked Nick.

The man looked at him consideringly.

'Yeah, it's the same,' he said at last. 'You gets a pan full of gravel and fills it with water, and washes and washes till the loose stuff is washed away an' only the heavy pay-dust stays in the pan. I can sell you an outfit for seven dollars fifty cents. What about that, brother?'

'I'm not stopping,' said Nick, shaking his head. 'I just wanted to know. Guess I'd better be going off now if I don't want to lose the light.'

'What d'you think of this, Amos?' shouted a man behind them, who had just come in. He slammed down a nugget on the bar and began to laugh. 'Now I kin pay me debts and get south. Nice little bit, isn't it?'

'Got any more?' asked the saloon keeper, Amos, regarding the nugget critically.

'Sure I have!' The man brought out a bag and poured a heap of gold dust on the counter. 'Take what I owe you, Amos, and I'm gettin' out of here. Guess I've made enough to keep me happy for a bit.'

The man Amos carefully weighed some of the gold dust and poured it into a bag that was just underneath the counter. The man scooped the rest of the dust back into his bag, and again laughed excitedly.

'Guess my wife won't believe in my luck,' he said to Nick conversationally. 'I said I'd strike lucky inside of three years, and here it's only two an' I've got it good an' strong! An' I'm lighting out for home. Yes, sir! You won't find me in this man's town by daylight to-morrow.'

'Guess we'll have a little party to-night, an' some of the boys can drink your health,' said the barman slowly. Nick glanced at him, and saw that his eyes were on the bag that the man had left lying on the bar.

'Sure they can!' said the man, laughing again. 'Guess I'll have to buy some dogs an' a sledge. I'll sure have to make good time back home now.'

'I shouldn't be in too great a hurry,' said the barman smoothly. 'Plenty of time. We'll get the boys to come along and whack it up some!'

'If you take my advice you'll snap out of here,' said the man that Nick had brought, roughly. 'If you start throwin' parties you won't have much of that pay-dust left to take back to your wife.'

'I guess you're right,' said the man, suddenly looking anxious.

'You mind your own business!' said the barman furiously. 'Who asked you to muscle in? Tom and me's pals, aren't we, Tom?'

'That's what happened before,' said the man slowly. 'I got a lucky strike, an' threw a party, and while I was drunk I signed my claim away. Guess I'd better beat it, Amos.'

'Now, an' I've asked the boys along!' said the man, with an evil look. 'An' there's no dogs fer sale fer a day or two.'

'Why not take a passage on my plane?' asked Nick quietly. 'I'm setting off in a couple of minutes now.'

'Are you? Will you take me along?' asked the man eagerly. 'Where are you going?'

'Indian Leap,' was the reply.

'Now, Tom, surely you aren't going to desert your old friends and go off with a stranger with all that gold about you?' said the barman, laying a persuasive hand on the man's arm.

'I'll think it over,' said the man, stepping back nervously. He grabbed up his bag and edged out of the shack, followed by Nick and the other man. 'Did you mean that?' he asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

'Of course I did. You'll have to pay your fare, of course.'

'Of course! I'll come with you, buddy! Shucks! That guy had me scared.'

Nick was not long in getting his nervous passen-

ger off to the Bellanca, and he grinned at the thought of the barman's fury when he realized that his prospective victim had gone. In a few minutes they were roaring merrily westward, towards Indian Leap and safety.

CHAPTER XV

RED HARFORD

IN a dirty little saloon in a mean street in Edmonton a man sat drinking and another man sat watching him. For some weeks Crosby had been drowning his sorrows in this cheap drink that he could buy in the saloons, and at last his silly, reckless intemperance had caught the eye of a very different kind of man.

Red Harford could drink too, but he was not the man to allow liquor to impair his faculties. All up and down the Dominion, Mounties would frown when his name was mentioned, and in faraway Chicago the police felt sore because he had slipped through their fingers at a moment when he was wanted very badly indeed.

Red Harford was known to be a whiskysmuggler, and suspected to be a killer. He sold illicit liquor known as hooch or firewater to the poor fools who bought it, and had thus brought himself within the notice of the law. But it is one thing to be within the notice of the law, and quite another thing in those wild parts to be within its reach, and Red Harford was far too clever to get into any dangerous positions.

He was watching Crosby now as the man drank himself into a state of silly talkativeness and self-pity. Red Harford would have scorned to drink so much of the stuff he sold, but he was always ready to profit by any one else's folly. Now he sat, tapping with his long nails on the table, waiting for

Crosby to be drunk enough to tell him what he wanted to know.

Presently he leaned across the table, and his cold eyes turned alertly to the flushed face of the pilot.

'What's all this about an aeroplane in Saskatchewan?' he asked.

'I told you,' said Crosby fretfully. 'Finest flier in all Chicago, that's me! And the finest little aeroplane in all the world lying up there in the snow.' He began to weep quietly, wiping his eyes on his coat sleeve.

'Too bad,' said Red Harford watchfully. 'How did it happen?'

'Listen pal, I'm telling you! A nasty little rat of a kid got my job. What d'you know about that? And my fine Stinson lying up there, an' the snow fallin'——'

'There hasn't been any snow in weeks,' said Harford coldly. 'Is it badly damaged?'

'Pancaked,' said Crosby, snuffling.

'I don't know anything about aeroplanes. What's wrong with it? No petrol?'

'Worse than that, pal. Much worse than that. No petrol, and the pontoons smashed to matchwood. It's just too bad. All the fault of a derved kid who got my job.'

'Is that so? What would it cost to repair the pontoons?'

'Oh, not so much,' said Crosby dolefully. 'But the plane ain't much use to me now. It was my last chance, and now the kid's gone and spoilt it.'

'Let me get this right. You and some kid were after a job, and the kid got it. Is that right?'

'That's right, pal.'

'What was the job?'

'Aren't I telling you? Pilot to a chap called Crossland who's running a hire service up in Indian Leap. I see his advertisement in the *Mercury*, and I says to meself, "Crosby," I says, "that'll do you O.K." But the kid got the job!'

'There's plenty flying jobs down south, surely,' said Harford.

'Yep—but they don't suit me.'

'Why's that?'

'Cause of my licence, see? It had to be some place off the map, where the police wouldn't come nosing around.'

'Why's that?' asked Harford keenly, but Crosby's muddled brain suddenly warned him that he was saying too much, and he frowned.

'That's my business, see? Who are you, anyway? A cop?'

'Aw, shucks, me a cop!' exclaimed Harford disgustedly. 'No, buddy, I guess I've got no more cause to love the Mounties than you have, or any other cops, either. What's the matter with your licence, eh? Here—have another shot of hooch.'

Crosby tossed off another drink and forgot the warning of silence that had deterred him from speaking before.

'Cancelled,' he said abruptly.

'Too bad! Why was that?'

'A bit of trouble about a crash,' said the man evasively.

'You were drunk, I suppose?'

'Never bin drunk in me life, pal. I'm surprised at you suggesting it. It was just a racket, that's what it was.'

'Sure it was,' said Harford. 'Well, tell me a bit more about this dandy little plane of yours. Where did you say it was?'

'Not more'n thirty-five miles east of Indian Leap. What happened was this. I saw the advertisement as I told you, and says to meself that it'll just suit me. I'm a good flier, I tell you. None better!'

'Is that so? Well, go on.'

'Well, I listened to the weather reports, and they say the ice is crackin' fast. I thinks this is me chance to get in ahead of the other guys, and I fills up with petrol and beats it for the north. But when I got up there I found the radio chap was wrong.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Well, the ice was still thick up there.'

'I don't get you, brother. I'm no pilot. What's the ice got to do with it?'

'Well, didn't I say I was fitted with pontoons? I just couldn't come down nowhere, that's all. I flew around and around, looking for somewhere to land, and there wasn't a scrap of water you could float a paper boat on anywhere!'

'I get you now. Too bad! What happened?'

'I went on flying round till my petrol give out. Then I *had* to come down. It wasn't what you'd

call a crash, but it bent the pontoons a bit. What we call a pancake.'

'I get you. And then?'

'Then I got out me little tent and just parked meself right there. I was all right for a bit, an' then I heard a plane one day, and sent up some smoke signals. 'Course I'd kept a fire built ready to light in case I ever wanted to signal to any one.'

'Smart of you,' said Harford approvingly.

'I believe in looking after Number One! That's me!'

'You signalled the aeroplane. What then?'

'A guy landed an old Fox Moth alongside and picked me up. It was the kid I told you about. He'd got my job.'

'Too bad. And he took you back to Indian Leap?'

'That's so. I had a word with Crossland, but the guy doesn't know where his interests are. He wouldn't do a thing. So I got on the train and came down here. As far as I can see, I'm finished.'

'Maybe you're not,' said Red Harford slowly. 'Maybe you an' me could work together.'

'Anything you say, boss,' said Crosby agreeably.

'It'll have to be, if you come in with me!'

'Just so! Is it flying?'

'Maybe. I'm not talking now. Come on to my rooms an' we'll have a chat in the morning.'

Crosby got up obediently and, reeling slightly as he walked, followed Red Harford along the street for a few blocks until they came to a tall, dark tenement with a single light shining in the

archway that led to a courtyard. Harford disappeared through this archway, and Crosby stumbled after him. They crossed the paved yard and went through a doorway into the house. Crosby followed up dark stairs until they came to a tiny landing on which a light was burning. Harford opened a door on the right of the landing, first turning the light behind him low, and stood for a moment listening intently. Crosby noticed with a shock of surprise that he had a gun in his hand.

'O.K., there's no one there,' muttered Red Harford after listening intently for a moment or two. He went into the room, the gun still held loosely in his hand, and proceeded to make a thorough search of the apartment. When he was satisfied at last that there was no one there, he put the gun away and threw himself down into a somewhat rickety chair.

'You never know,' he observed, 'when some one may be laying for you. And these doors are easy to open. I've opened all the others in the house, and I guess they've all opened mine some time or another.'

'Is that so?' murmured Crosby. He was feeling very sleepy and did not pay much attention to what his host was saying. 'Nice little place you got here, boss.'

'It isn't nice—it's punk!' snarled Harford. 'Some day I'll have a place that'll make the richest man in all Canada look cheap! But that ain't yet. Want some food, Crosby?'

'Sure, I could do with a bite,' said the pilot, rousing a little at the mention of food.

'Get something out of the cupboard, then,' said Harford gruffly. 'An' get some for me while you're doin' it.'

Crosby felt rather surprised, but some instinct that the drink had not entirely dulled told him that he had better obey. Accordingly he shambled to the cupboard and brought out the remains of a stale loaf, some sausage, and some pickles. The couple then dined without much enthusiasm.

When they had finished Crosby found that he was expected to wash up the utensils that had been used, and afterwards he was shown a small pallet with a few rugs thrown over it on which he was told that he could sleep. He lay down, remembering to take his boots off, but not bothering further, and went off into a heavy slumber before the mood of self-pity that had taken hold of him in the saloon had time to return.

He had plenty of opportunity for indulging in that emotion the following morning, for he woke with a racking headache to find that Harford had gone out and had locked him in. He could find nothing but some water to drink, and nothing to eat but a few fragments of the feast of the night before. He was a very unhappy, unshaven object, sitting with his head in his hands on the edge of his pallet, when Harford returned.

Harford had been doing some hard thinking during the night, and had come to the conclusion that Crosby would be useful to him. That idea

had first arrived in his mind when they were in the saloon, and he had brought the pilot back to his apartment so that the man could not escape while he was thinking the matter out.

He had done some solid thinking while the foolish drunkard snored on the pallet, and he was now sure that in partnership he and Crosby could—as he put it—‘do themselves a bit of good’. He had then gone to a more comfortable bed and had slept well, going out to breakfast at an early hour, and then proceeding to see certain folks and do a certain amount of business in the shadier quarters of Edmonton.

Crosby greeted him with a scowl when he returned, but Harford paid no attention, merely telling the pilot to smarten himself up as he was taking him somewhere. Crosby, who was ready for a quarrel, was nevertheless overawed by the other man’s personality, and did as he was told without comment. Later on that day both men boarded a train for the north.

CHAPTER XVI

A BIG COMMISSION

NICK found the days slipping past very quickly. He was busier than one would have expected in such an out-of-the-way little town as Indian Leap, for Crossland had advertised his air transport service in many directions, and the Bellanca was hired to carry freight to and fro between many towns quite a good distance from its aerodrome.

The Fox Moth, too, was in demand by small parties wishing to get to places more quickly than the traditional dog-sleigh would take them, and Mounties, missionaries, and business men from Edmonton or Regina sometimes hired the little craft for a trip involving several days; Nick would pick them up from one of the regular aerodromes and take them round wherever they wished to go.

Crossland was delighted with the success of his venture. He had risked a good deal in setting up an aerial transport business, and had it failed he would have lost much of his life's savings. But he was nothing if not adventurous, and after all the money was his to risk: he had no shareholders to think about.

He was quite well aware that he owed a good deal of his success to Nick, for the boy made light of work, and was always cheerful and confident. He never grumbled, even when some trips turned out to be long, dull, and even fairly risky, but took everything as part of the day's work with a smile.

There had been no repetition of the accident to

the Bellanca. Nick had learned his lesson, and now was the most careful pilot to be found in the north. His passengers, knowing nothing of flying, were sometimes a little impatient at the precautions he took, but he allowed nothing to ruffle him, and went on doing what he judged to be right without taking the slightest notice of any one.

Crossland also admitted that they had a treasure in the surly Horridge. The man made no friends in Indian Leap, and quite obviously thought the town and the people in it beneath his notice. But he was a careful and conscientious engineer, and Nick knew that he could rely on the engines being up to scratch if Horridge passed them as fit.

The little roll of bills that Nick kept with his best suit was growing to respectable proportions, and he was very glad one day to send a sum in a registered letter to Mr. Clayton for the purpose of his father's defence. Mortimer Lester wrote a touching letter of thanks when he heard through his old friend what his son had done, and the boy treasured the brief epistle and made up his mind again that he would see his father vindicated somehow, some day.

'What we want,' said the boy one evening as he sat in Crossland's shack, 'is a big, regular contract so that we don't depend entirely on chance fixtures.'

'That's so,' said the big man thoughtfully.

'You ought to be watching the papers like a hawk,' said the boy accusingly.

'What for, buddy?'

'Why, for folks advertising for tenders for contracts.'

'I don't get that, buddy,' put in Mathers, who was sitting in the doorway, chewing a quid of tobacco reflectively. 'You're talking English again.'

Nick giggled. Mathers amused him continuously, with his affectation of contempt for anything that was not a hundred-per-cent. Canadian.

'Gosh old hemlock!' he exclaimed with an exaggerated drawl. 'Why, any kid knows what that means! When a guy wants a costly job done he puts it in the papers, and then the folks that want the job just say what they'll charge for doing it. And he fixes up with the guy that charges lowest.'

'You started off right, buddy, but you ended up just as English as ever,' said Reuben Mathers tranquilly. 'Guess there's no larnin' some folks! So you think if Martin looked at the papers he'd find some one wantin' a job done that he could put in for?'

'That's the ticket,' said Crossland. 'Hey—where's the *Mercury*?'

Nick found the paper, and Crossland studied it for some time, while the other two chatted disjointedly. The weather had warmed up to such an extent that they were able to sit in the evenings with the cabin door open, watching the sunset over the prairie and the little Indian children playing about among the trees.

Presently Crossland threw the paper away with the remark that there was nothing in it. He joined in the conversation until suddenly he broke off in

the middle of a sentence and stood up, staring with narrowed eyes towards the woods, where a dark figure could be seen coming out of the trees into the path of the setting sun.

'There's the trooper,' he said, as the others glanced at him inquiringly.

Trooper Curtis had returned with the dog-sledge bought from the trapper, a week after Nick left him at the settlement on Cree Lake. After a short time in Indian Leap he had gone off again, this time riding Maisie, for a tour of inspection in his district. Nothing had been heard of him for a while, and now here he was riding in at sunset, looking just the same as ever, whistling softly as he came.

The three friends went forward up the main street to meet him, and he flung up a gloved hand in greeting as they got near. Then he swung himself off the mare and tossed the reins to Nick.

'Take her in for me, buddy, will you?' he asked quietly. 'Get Brown Owl to rub her down.'

Nick led the lovely animal into her stable, and then went to look for the Indian, Brown Owl, who served the trooper in the capacity of cook, groom, and general utility man when he was in Indian Leap. When he had given Trooper Curtis's instruction he doubled back to the shack, where the three men were in earnest conversation.

'Am I in the way?' he asked uncertainly as they fell silent at his approach.

'Not a bit, buddy,' said Curtis with a quiet smile. 'Remember those folks up at Cree Lake?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Remember what I said was the cause of their trouble?'

'Firewater.'

'Right first time.' The trooper began to whistle.

'Have they been at it again?' asked Nick breathlessly.

'Not so far as I know. But—I bin ridin' about a bit, buddy. I'll say I've done a mile or two with old Maisie just now. Near as far as the snow-line we bin together. And I seen a few more villages in just the same state, and fer just the same reason.'

'There hasn't been a bad man round your district for many a year, Trooper,' said Reuben thoughtfully.

'You're dern right. Thought we'd stamped them out. But some skunk's forgot what we taught 'em in days gone by, and it seems I got to find him and teach him all over again.'

'You mean some one's going round selling drink to the Indians?' asked Nick excitedly.

'And not only to Indians,' nodded the trooper.

'And you're going to find him and put him in prison?'

'Sure I'll find him, buddy! You know what they say about the Mounties—that they always get their man. An' I'll get him! An' *when* I get him he's goin' ter be very sorry he set foot in my district with his poison. Upsettin' my folks!'

Nick went to bed that night feeling greatly excited and wishing that he could do something to

help the trooper. He knew that the selling of the fiery, raw spirit was illegal, and he had seen something of its effect on the lives of the people who gave way to its potency. He had gathered from what was said by Curtis and the others that there must be a still somewhere, where the stuff was manufactured, and he knew that this, too, was against the law.

Before the boy was awake next morning the trooper was off again, but he left a good deal for the little town to talk about. The storekeeper in particular was thoroughly excited about the whole matter, and no one who came to Indian Leap for the next week managed to escape hearing all about it.

Jean Latour paid one of his flying visits a short time later, and his swarthy face grew dark as he listened to Reuben Mathers's story.

'If I catch heem, my old frien', I bring heem back here to you,' he said fiercely. 'Dere is no one I hate more, I t'ink, zan ze man who send de Injuns mad. Ze trooper, he vill not catch heem, but I—Jean Latour—I vill catch heem. I know all ze trails.'

'You sure do,' agreed Mathers. 'Where are you goin' now?'

'North—always north. Vere ze snow lies still. Here it is not good for me. I pick up a dog-train beyond ze Slave Lake, and go hunt my traps. Here it is not good any more till ze river closes down again.'

He was soon gone again, and Horridge sniffed

and counted over his various pieces of equipment as if unsure of the trapper's honesty.

'I don't think Jean Latour would take anything,' grinned Nick as he watched him. 'For one thing, what does he want with sparking plugs up beyond the snow-line?'

'You talk boloney,' said Horridge gruffly. 'Sparking plugs is always useful! An' Wops is natural born thieves by instinct. I don't put no kinder trust in 'em.'

'I don't think you do in any one,' commented Nick.

'You're dern right; I don't!' was the surly reply.

'Hi! Nick!'

The boy swung round at the sound of Crossland's voice, and saw the man standing by the shack, waving a paper in his hand. At once Nick trotted across to see what he wanted, and found that there was an advertisement in the *Mercury* that was causing him acute excitement.

'You were right, buddy,' he said cheerfully. 'See here, a company exporting radium wants tenders for carting the stuff to Edmonton. Say—what about it, kid? Can we do it?'

'Course we can,' said Nick with a delighted grin. 'We'd better work out figures, and then I can fly along and have a word with them. Where is the camp?'

'Five hundred miles north,' said Crossland absorbedly. 'Right above the Slave Lake. Think you can manage it, Nick?'

'Sure I can.' The boy pored over the advertise-

ment and then turned his attention to his charts. 'It's a bit more than five hundred,' he said, 'but that doesn't matter. 'I'll have to make arrangements about refuelling on the way. I guess that can be done.'

Martin Crossland was sure that it could be done, and for the next hour they worked out figures, finding out what the trip would cost, and how cheaply they could do the carting and still show a profit. Finally they arrived at a sum, and Nick stood up, rubbing the back of his head.

'That's that, then,' he said with satisfaction. 'Shall I fly up and see them now?'

'It says here that the tenders are to go to their Edmonton office,' said Crossland, pointing to the advertisement.

'So it does,' said Nick with disappointment. 'I suppose you'll send it by mail.'

'I'll take it down myself, by steamer,' said Crossland firmly. 'I shan't be long, Nick. Look after things till I come back.'

He was away for four days, but he came back with the contract in his pocket. He was delighted, too, and told how there were several companies after the contract, but that their figures had been the most favourable.

'We got to make it pay, Nick,' he said seriously.

'We'll do that,' said the boy confidently. 'When's the first consignment coming down?'

'It's a monthly trip, and the first one is to take place in three weeks' time, on the 23rd,' said Crossland. 'That gives me time to arrange for petrol to

be dumped for you in several places. No sense in running out of fuel with a cargo as precious as radium on board.'

Nick was not idle while they were waiting for the date on which he was to fly up to the radium camp, but he arranged matters so that he had plenty of time for the trip. He set out eventually full of excitement. He knew that the contract meant a great deal to Crossland, and he was determined that he should make a success of it. He calculated his times to a perfect degree of nicety, and knew that he would drop down in the camp at about five in the evening.

As the big Bellanca thundered northwards the boy saw below him the landscape gradually changing with the latitudes. It was nearly summer in Indian Leap, but the farther north he got the less sign there was of warmer weather.

Shortly before he was due to drop down at the camp he saw a dog-sledge below, and dived down to have a look at it. It was Jean Latour, making good time across the desolate country, and he looked up and waved as Nick circled low to wave back.

Not very much later the boy brought down his aircraft on a river near to the radium camp.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RADIUM CAMP

THE sun shone with a stony brightness over the radium camp. Once again Nick was in the land of snow and spruces, and the little log cabins that were clustered together round the workings had each a trail of smoke from the stove that was never allowed to go out, day or night.

He put down gently on the water and taxied in a shower of spray towards a tiny jetty that had been built out over the river. When within a reasonable distance he threw out his anchor, and at the same time a canoe was put off to bring him in.

'Are you Crossland's Aircraft?' asked the man, resting on his paddle as he drew alongside.

'Yes,' said Nick, preparing to step down into the canoe.

'That's oke, then. Mr. Harrison's waitin' fer you.'

Nick was taken to a biggish shack where a small, dark man was sitting at a desk, writing. He nodded as the boy entered, but did not cease his work for some minutes. Then he sat back in his chair and regarded him thoughtfully.

'Why did you come down on the river?' he asked at last.

'My base is on a river, sir, so I'm fitted with floats,' said Nick quietly.

'How d'you aim to come down at Edmonton, then?'

'Edmonton's on a river.'

'Yes, but the aerodrome isn't.'

'An aeroplane on floats gets the same facilities as a flying boat, or ship. I shall have to pay the usual landing dues, that's all.'

'Hm. It isn't as easy to load you up on the river, you know.'

'It'll be easier in the winter. Once everything freezes up again I shall go on to skis.'

'You could land here on skis now,' the manager pointed out.

'But not in Edmonton, sir. There I should have to have wheels to land on the aerodrome in the ordinary way.'

'Well, I suppose you know your business! Now, do you know the value of the stuff you're carting?'

'I know radium is pretty valuable, sir.'

'You get it into your head that these radium concentrates are the most valuable things you're ever likely to carry!' said the manager brusquely. 'Come out and see the stuff now.'

He rose and led the boy to where a number of little sacks were lying in the snow, no bigger than small sandbags.

'These weigh anything from a hundred and forty to two hundred pounds,' he said. 'How many can you take?'

Nick did a rapid sum and mentioned a number. The manager frowned.

'That doesn't seem many,' he complained. 'Oh, well, I'll get my men to load up now. You'd like a spot of food, I dare say.'

Nick hesitated.

'I'd rather put off the return trip until to-morrow,' he said at last. 'I've done all of six hundred miles to-day, and that's over seven hours' flying. I shan't get there in daylight if I set off now, and I guess it'll take a time to load up.'

The manager nodded.

'Guess you're right,' he said. 'I'll get the loading done, and I'll turn you over to Cooky, who'll see that you get some food. I shall want you to sign for the sacks to-morrow before you go off.'

'I'll lend a hand with the loading,' said Nick, but the manager shook his head.

'They want careful handling,' he said. 'D'you know anything about radio-activity?'

'Not a thing!' laughed Nick.

'I thought not. These sacks have to be handled with all sorts of precautions. My men know what to do—you'd better leave it to them.'

Cooky turned out to be a negro, black as the ace of spades, who had surrounded himself with about five stoves in his shack, under the pretence that he required them for his work, and thus managed to get an atmosphere of warmth around him. He looked up with a grin as Nick entered.

'Yes, sah, I get you grub,' he said cheerfully. 'I got stew, I got coffee, I got hot rolls, I got pork an' beans. What you like, sah?'

'The stew sounds nice,' said Nick.

'Well, sah, de stew him not ready yet. Feller go out with gun and bring in rabbits. "Cooky," he say, "make a stew." "Right, sah," I say. An' dere it be. But not yet.'

'I see. Well, what about hot rolls and coffee?'

'Well, sah, de coffee him be ready bimeby, and de rolls is in de oven. Very good rolls, but not yet.'

'Pork and beans, then?' grinned Nick.

'Now, sah, you said it! Han' me dat tin opener an' I have some grub ready for you in just about two seconds. How many tins you eat, sah? I got twelve dozen in here.'

'Er—one will do,' said Nick, peeling off his coat, for the atmosphere of the shack was stifling. 'Perhaps I can have some of the stew and other things later on.'

'Sure you can, sah! Jest you sit down by dat table and I soon fix you up. Yes, sah!'

Nick was glad to get out of the shack as soon as he had eaten some of the eternal pork and beans. He wandered about and watched the men for a time, and then was attracted to a tent that was being hurriedly erected at a little distance from the workings.

Something about the portly figure who was busy with ropes attracted his attention, and he went towards the tent. To his surprise he found Mr. Hetherington and his usual Indian companion, with a sledge and train of dogs near by.

'Why, Mr. Hetherington, what are you doing here?' he exclaimed.

'Eh? Why, it's young Nick! I'm very pleased to see you here, dear brother! We have just arrived. I am holding a meeting here to-night. Will you hold on to this rope? Thanks, my dear lad. That will do splendidly.'

Nick helped with the erection of the tent, and then with unpacking the hymn-books and other things from the sledge. It was not until everything was ready that the missionary asked what Nick was doing up at the radium camp.

The explanation was soon made, and then Mr. Hetherington went along to interview Cooky, who greeted him rapturously.

'Hi, Massa Hetherington, I remembers you. Up at Forty-Mile you had a meetin' two year ago. When you holdin' your meetin' to-night, Massa Hetherington?'

'When do the men knock off?' asked the experienced missionary.

'At sundown, massa. Not so long now.'

'Then they eat, and then I'll ring my little bell. I'll show up at the meal shack, Cooky. Here's my contribution.'

Mr. Hetherington passed over some of his provisions and left the shack. Cooky could be heard singing at the top of his voice as they went down to watch the men loading up the Bellanca.

'I hope they're not putting too much aboard,' said Nick thoughtfully. 'I told him what she'd take, but she looks a little low on the water to me.'

The men were finishing by that time, and very shortly afterwards Cooky could be heard beating on an old petrol tin, and shouting, 'Come an' git it! Come an' git it!'

The men were not slow to answer the call, and poured up from all over the camp, ready and eager

for a meal. Nick slid into a place in an inconspicuous corner of the big room, but Mr. Hetherington approached the manager, shook hands with him, and sat down plumply on his right side as if the place belonged to him.

He joined cheerfully in the conversation, and his big, booming voice could be heard all over the hall. He was talking mainly about a derelict village he had come across on his journey, and presently one of the miners looked up.

‘Them fools won’t keep off the firewater,’ he said. ‘I ain’t got nothin’ to say against decent liquor, but that stuff they sells the Injuns is rank poison. Then they dies off an’ their villages goes like what you say, boss.’

There was a murmur of assent. The miners were quieter than usual, owing to the presence of a stranger among them, but when presently the missionary got up to go, and announced that he was holding a meeting in his tent and would be glad to see all of them along, quite a good number went. Nick of course went, if only to back up a fellow citizen of Indian Leap, and he found it extremely interesting to watch the miners as the little service proceeded. Cooky worked himself up into a fine frenzy, as negroes often do, and rolled his eyes as he sang the familiar old hymns. The rest of the men took it rather more calmly, although for the most part they were interested. The manager did not attend.

Nick awoke early next morning, and at last was treated to the rolls and coffee promised by the

black cook. Then he went down to the side of the river to have a look at the Bellanca.

Once again he did not like the look of the plane, and wondered if he was going to have trouble in getting it off the water. There was no wind, he noticed, and the river had high banks on the opposite side, and indeed on each side of the camp also. These were not ideal conditions for taking off a heavy load, as he well knew.

He went over to the manager's office, but found to his annoyance that the man was not there. One of the miners said that he was somewhere in the workings, and Nick felt very angry that his departure should be delayed in this way. But he realized that he might have caught the man if he had been there earlier, and contented himself with filling up the tanks with petrol preparatory to starting on the return trip.

Crossland had arranged petrol dumps at various places on the route, and had put an Indian in charge of each. With his usual foresight he had made each dump a tiny store, with a few necessities such as travelling trappers might be glad to buy, and he had also rigged up a radio transmission and reception set in each so that communication between them was easy.

It was nearly midday when the manager returned, and called Nick into his office to sign the receipt for the radium.

'Sign here,' said the man abruptly. 'No need to read it all through, surely.'

'I'd better see what I'm signing,' said the boy,

reading on. Then he stopped and put his finger on a number. 'That's too many sacks,' he said quietly.

'Nonsense! They're small ones,' said the man impatiently.

'Well, I hope you're right. If she's overloaded she won't get to Edmonton, that's all I can say.' He signed in the place indicated by the manager, and went out to the plane.

Nick started up the engine and taxied about the river for a while in the usual way. He noticed that the air had got quite hot, although there was snow everywhere, and that in the tunnel formed by the high banks of the river it was still and heavy. He realized afresh that taking off was not going to be easy, and was once more annoyed that he had not been able to go in the early morning, when the freshness of the air would have given more lift than the present conditions.

At last he was sure of his engine, and turned up-stream for the take-off. He opened the throttle and the plane roared over the water, but although he pulled the stick back firmly, instead of gently as he usually did, there was no answering lift, and the Bellanca refused to come unstuck.

As there was no wind, he turned at the bend of the river and tried once more down-stream. Again she refused to come off the water, even though the stick was back as far as it would go. Nick was sure that he was heavily overloaded, and after one or two more tries, he taxied slowly towards the jetty again and switched off his engine.

'What's the trouble?' yelled the manager, who was standing on the jetty.

'Overloaded,' shouted Nick. 'You'll have to take half this stuff back.'

'Ridiculous!' bellowed the manager.

'It is! You've wasted my time and my petrol to-day. We can't run the contract at the figure we mentioned if this sort of thing goes on. Get your men to unload some of these sacks.'

There was a peremptory note about that speech of Nick's that surprised the manager into giving orders for the radium sacks to be removed almost before he realized what he was doing. The men went out in their canoes and the work of taking back the sacks went on, until Nick was satisfied that the load was not too much for the aircraft.

He then remembered to have the receipt form amended, and finally had another attempt at taking off. It was difficult enough, even with the depleted load, in the still air, but he managed it, and just cleared the spruce trees that fringed the southern bank with about two feet to spare. As he roared south towards Edmonton he resolved that in future he would take off in the early morning from the radium camp, or not at all.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DAMAGED STINSON

THE rest of the trip with the cargo of radium concentrates was accomplished without incident. Nick landed in Edmonton and was met by a representative of the company, who took over the load and gave him a receipt and the money that had been agreed upon.

Nick was delighted to find that by wasting half a day in the town he could pick up a load for Rochester, a town about seventy-five miles away, on the route to Indian Leap. He was glad of the opportunity of stretching his legs and getting away from the sound of the engine, so he went ashore and thoroughly explored the town, stopping at frequent intervals for drinks of lemonade and buns, which he enjoyed thoroughly.

Although he had not been up in the wilds for a great length of time, he found the town fascinating, and wandered round, looking at the shops, until it was time to pick up his cargo and set off.

He put down at Rochester in good time and discharged his cargo, receiving the due payment. He realized that he would be taking quite a good sum of money back to Crossland, and was very pleased with the thought. He refuelled at Rochester, and was just settling up for the petrol when the manager of the little aerodrome strolled up.

'Say, buddy, d'you want a couple of passengers?' he asked.

'Where do they want to go?' asked Nick.

'Somewhere up towards Indian Leap, I guess. Seems they've crashed a plane somewhere up there, and they want a lift up to get busy on it.'

'Sure I'll take them,' said Nick. The manager led him to where two men were standing, and for a moment the boy did not recognize Crosby in the bloated, red-eyed wretch standing beside an alert, dark man who gave his name as Harford.

'Why, it's the kid!' exclaimed the pilot, and then Nick knew who it was and grinned.

'Going up to salvage that bus of yours?' he asked.

'We're going up to have a look at it, to see if it's worth salvaging,' said Harford, gazing at the boy keenly.

'Oh, it's worth salvaging all right,' said Nick. 'It only wants new pontoons, and the undercart strengthening up a bit. There's nothing else wrong with it, is there?' He turned inquiringly to Crosby.

'Nope. Sound as a bell. Except fer the radio,' added the man.

'Well, what do you suggest?' asked Harford suavely.

'Well, you can get spares here,' said Nick. 'I'll fly you up there, with your spares—at the ordinary rates! And I'll bring my engineer, Horridge—remember him, Crosby?—along to lend a hand. He's the best man I can think of for the job.'

'And you guarantee that the plane can be made fit to fly in the way you suggest?' said Harford keenly.

Nick opened his mouth, and then shut it again

suddenly. He took a belated violent dislike to the man, and got the impression somehow that he was trying to trap him.

'I guarantee nothing,' he said slowly. 'It's nothing to do with me. I've said what I think, but I'm not going farther than that. I don't care if the thing never flies again! Now, I'm taking off in twenty minutes, and if you want to come you'd better step on the gas!'

He turned away. Harford, flushing angrily, turned to Crosby with raised eyebrows.

'The kid's right,' said the pilot wearily. 'What about a drink, Red?'

'I've told you before, we don't drink when we're on a job,' snarled Red Harford. 'Get a move on now, and we'll have a look at the stuff we've got to buy.'

At the time mentioned by Nick the two men were ready, with all the gear necessary for repairing the Stinson, which was still lying out beyond Indian Leap. First obtaining his fares from the two men, for he did not trust them in the least, Nick flew them straight to the spot where the aeroplane was lying, some two hundred miles away. He had taken his bearings on the occasion that he had picked up Crosby, and that was one of the things that he was not likely to forget. Accordingly he dropped down on a small lake about a quarter of a mile from the wreckage, and then helped the men to unload their gear.

'I'll bring Horridge along in the morning,' he said, for dusk was falling and there could be no

work done that night. 'I suggest that you leave your gear here, and I'll bring our trolley along, and we'll do the repairing as close to the bank as possible.'

'Free with your suggestions, aren't you?' sneered Red Harford, fuming because he was face to face with something that he did not understand, and was thus forced to take advice from some one much younger than himself.

'Take it or leave it,' said Nick. 'Got all you want for the night?'

'I guess so,' said Crosby. 'You remember I packed my gear into the Stinson before you took me off.'

Nick made all haste back to Indian Leap, feeling furious with himself for having got mixed up with the fortunes of the two men, for if Crosby had struck him as unattractive before, he did so doubly now, and Red Harford was no less repulsive in his own way.

However, he realized that he could not pick and choose his passengers any more than the driver of a train can, and since they had engaged him for the trip, it was up to him to see that everything went off all right.

Crossland was glad to see him back, and was very glad when the boy handed over the money he had earned. But he frowned a little when the story of the pilot of the Stinson was told.

'I didn't cotton to that guy,' he said slowly. 'Still, if you've engaged to see that plane of theirs right, I guess we got to do it. You're flying Horridge over to-morrow, you say?'

'That's so,' said Nick.

'Guess I'll come too, and see there's no funny business. I didn't cotton to that guy, and from what you say, I guess his boy friend ain't no better than he was.'

Horridge received his instructions with a grunt. When Nick said that the damaged plane was a Stinson he gave an audible groan.

'No good, them pesky little things,' he grunted.

'You don't approve of them?' inquired Nick with a grin.

'I sartinly don't!'

'Nor the Fox Moth, nor the Bellanca, I take it?'

'You're dern right. They're punk. Design's all wrong.'

'You ought to design an aeroplane,' said Nick, busily sorting tools to take with them.

'I have done,' said Horridge surlily.

'Well, why don't you submit your design to a firm of constructors?'

'I have done.'

'And what happened?'

'They threw it out. Said it wouldn't fly! Dern idiots! An' then they go an' incorporate some of my best ideas in their new models. Thieves.'

'Did they? Which of your ideas did they pinch?'

'Slots,' grunted Horridge. 'They all got 'em now. I put that idea down on paper in 1930.'

'Hm! A chap called Handley Page put it down in 1921, so I've heard,' grinned Nick.

'Wal, fer cryin' out loud! He must've heard me talking about it,' said Horridge indignantly.

'Maybe,' said Nick. 'Can we get the trolley into the Bellanca, do you think?'

They managed to get everything that they needed into the big freight-carrier, and within a very short time were circling over the little camp by the Stinson, preparatory to landing on the lake. The men heard them, and came out of their tiny tent to wave as they flew over. They then came to meet them as Nick landed the Bellanca.

Red Harford grinned dourly as he saw Crossland accompany Horridge and the boy. He realized perfectly well that these people did not trust him and his partner, but that thought did not trouble him in the least. He listened to the considered judgement of Horridge, and was satisfied to learn that the engineer did not think the damage particularly troublesome. But he was annoyed to learn that he would have to lend a hand with the shifting of the plane.

Red Harford belonged to the type of man who hates hard work. He would plan and scheme and go to endless trouble to avoid even the simplest form of labour. Now that he had to take off his coat and get down to it, he was furious, and if he had not spent a good deal of money on the spare pontoons and that sort of thing, he would have called the whole deal off.

However, he lifted and pulled and pushed as Horridge directed, and it may be that the dour engineer, realizing the sort of man he was dealing with, gave him a bit more of the heavy work than was strictly necessary. Anyway, when evening came Red Harford was complaining of a strained

back, a ricked shoulder, blistered hands, and a headache. His hands were certainly blistered, but the rest of the injuries had to be taken on trust, and no one was very sympathetic.

Work went on for several days, and each day Crossland accompanied Horridge and Nick, and lent his assistance to the task. Now that he had seen Harford he liked him less than Crosby, and on the third day of the work something happened that confirmed his views.

Nick happened to glance up from his work and saw a motionless figure on horseback, some two hundred yards away at the edge of a bunch of trees. He gave a pleased exclamation.

'Why, that's Corporal Banks, isn't it, Martin?' he asked.

There was a smothered sound beside him, and the next moment Red Harford was just not there! No one saw him go, or where he went, but as there were trees fringing the lake-side where they were working, and a fairly steep bank leading down to the water, it was not difficult for an experienced man to vanish if he wanted to.

Corporal Banks rode forward slowly and greeted Crossland with a nod. He was chewing all the time, and his bright eyes flashed round the group thoughtfully.

'What happened?' he asked shortly.

'This plane crashed here some weeks ago, before the break-up,' explained Crossland. 'This is the pilot—Crosby, his name is. He's engaged us to put it right for him.'

'I see.' The Mountie rode forward and round the aeroplane, eyeing it carefully. Nick felt that he would know it and all of them if he met them again. Presently the corporal faced Crosby, whose bloated face flushed under his scrutiny.

'Flyin' fer pleasure?' inquired Banks.

'Yep. I'm just lookin' round these parts,' said Crosby volubly. 'I didn't know this part of the world. I come from down south, an' when I couldn't find any water to come down on, an' my petrol ran out, why, I just naturally crashed.'

'Just so.' Banks continued to stare round him. After a pause he spoke again. 'Thought I see another guy.'

'Yep, there was another guy, but he's just gone off fer a moment,' said Crosby eagerly. He knew Harford's aversion to Mounties, greater even than to the ordinary city police, and he hoped to conceal his new-found friend's identity if he could.

'Ah. Gone far?'

'I don't know where he's gone. D'you want him?' asked Crosby boldly.

'Guess I can find him when I want him,' said Banks calmly. He turned his horse and rode off slowly into the trees again.

'What's the matter with Harford?' asked Nick in amazement.

'Little difference with the cops when he was a lad,' said Crosby smoothly. 'He's never liked 'em since. Finds it difficult to be civil to 'em, so he goes off if he sees one comin'.'



'Guess I can find him when I want him,' said Banks calmly

'You don't say!' murmured Martin Crossland sarcastically. 'Wonder when he'll come back.'

Harford came back about an hour later, and nothing was said about his abrupt disappearance. Crossland knew, and Nick was beginning to suspect, that their customers were of the shadiest, but they could not refuse to fulfil a contract for that reason, as they had no cause to connect the men with any crime.

A few days later the work was completed, the Stinson was filled up with petrol, and the men flew off. Crossland, watching them disappear into the heavens, announced that he was 'dern glad to see the last of them'. Nick heartily agreed.

CHAPTER XIX

A TERRIBLE CRIME

'ONE of the best things I ever did,' said Red Harford ruminatively, 'was when I picked up with you. You got to admit it, Crosby. Our luck has been grand ever since we started to work together.'

'Yeh,' said the pilot listlessly.

Crosby was a very different man in these days from the blustering, self-satisfied pilot whom Nick picked up by his wrecked aeroplane at the time of the break-up. Then he had certainly been trying to evade the law, but it is doubtful if he would have done anything that amounted to a flagrant breaking of the law. He had been deprived of his 'B' licence for flying when drunk, and thus endangering the lives of passengers, but in the last few months he had done such things in the company of Red Harford as put him for ever beyond the world of honest men.

He wondered sometimes how Harford could sleep at night, for the thought of his crimes was driving him rapidly to seek forgetfulness in the crude rye whisky sold by Red to the Indians that were his dupes. Since they had got the Stinson going again Harford had been severe on this matter of drinking, saying that it was one thing to sell the stuff to Indians, but quite another to be foolish enough to drink it oneself.

Crosby agreed—in theory. But in practice he found that his thoughts, when he was sober, were too

much for him. He did not drink when he had flying to do, for he knew that Harford would have shot him if he found his own precious life endangered in any way, but as soon as the day's work was done the pilot sought oblivion in the speediest possible manner.

Red Harford was one of those men who are never satisfied. No sooner had he announced that their luck had been good than he began to think of ways in which it might be made better. And when a crook thinks along those lines it means trouble for somebody.

For years he had been engaged in the selling of liquor illicitly to Indians and whites alike, and always his clever brain had kept him out of the hands of the police. That his description was not unknown to some of them he knew quite well. He was aware, for instance, that Corporal Banks would remember an occasion in a saloon in Manitoba, when the corporal was a young trooper, and when a bullet in the shoulder had prevented him from arresting Red Harford at the outset of his career of crime. That was long ago, but Harford was no fool. He had been startled to see Banks ride out of the wood when the Stinson was being repaired, and he was hoping hard that his dive into the trees had not been noticed. He knew that Banks would know him again if ever he crossed his path, and since the Stinson came into operation he and Crosby had spent most of their time in British Columbia and Saskatchewan, where the corporal would not be likely to be on patrol.

But a few weeks had dulled Harford's remembrance of his fear, and now he and Crosby had worked towards Alberta again. Harford was sure that there were other means of adding to their income, and while Crosby applied himself to the bottle, he thought out schemes.

'Know anything about pelts, brother?' he asked presently.

'A little,' said Crosby, staring.

'Enough to sell 'em?'

'I guess so, pal. But what's the idea? 'Turnin' trapper?'

'I might be,' said Harford suavely.

'I guess not!' said Crosby satirically. 'You don't fool me that way. What's the idea?'

'We might pick up a pelt or two on our travels,' said Harford indifferently.

'Outa some other chap's traps?'

'Sure. 'Turnin' squeamish at last?' sneered Harford.

'Not me, pal! I was only thinkin'. You're goin' to lay up some trouble fer yerself if you start that racket. You'll have all the trappers up against you, 'stead of only the Mounties.'

'Aw, lay off,' said Harford disgustedly. 'I don't give a dern fer trappers any more'n I do fer Mounties. They can't beat me, 'specially now I've got you an' the Stinson.'

'That's right, too,' agreed Crosby.

'There's money in it,' said Harford, leaning forward eagerly, his small eyes gleaming with cupidity. 'Thousands of dollars! I tell you what we've got

to do, and that is to set off with a cargo of petrol, leaving some at various dumps, an' then find the traps, refuelling on the way back. What about that?'

'Good enough,' said Crosby wearily. 'Where do you aim to sell the pelts?'

'Don't you worry about that, brother. I got friends in most of the big cities, and they won't refuse to buy good pelts at two-thirds the market price just because they don't know where they come from. No, I guess we shan't have no difficulty in selling our pelts—when we get 'em.'

'As you say, pal,' said Crosby.

With very little more talk the scheme was perfected, and the two scoundrels set out on their preliminary flight over the northern forests that would be their best hunting ground. The petrol caches were laid, but Harford grudging the money thus spent, and on more than one occasion persuaded Crosby to take a chance and fly off while the man who had served them with fuel was about some other business before receiving his money.

But this could not continue indefinitely, for the Stinson would be described, and the identification letters quoted, when the infuriated dealer made known his loss to the police. On more than one occasion both men were busy with paint pots, marking new letters on wing and fuselage, but both knew that this method of evading identification could not last for ever.

Harford grew more and more reckless as he realized that their time in the northern latitudes was

growing short. He felt that a few weeks would see the invincible Mounties on their tracks in good earnest, and when that happened the best that they could do would be to take their ill-gotten gains and fly to America, where, somewhere in the wilds of Arizona, on the borders of Mexico, they would abandon the plane and take their ease for a while.

But although he knew that every week made their danger more apparent, he could not bring himself to call a halt while it was still possible to squeeze some more profit out of the country. However, the problem of the purchase of petrol was acute.

They were flying over a certain tract in northern Alberta for the first time when Harford noticed a wind-sock and a shack beside a lonely lake. The sight intrigued him, and he told Crosby to circle low while he figured out what the meaning of it might be. He noticed, as the pilot obeyed his instructions, that a man came out of the shack and gazed up at them for a moment, and then disappeared as if satisfied that they were not the folk he was expecting. This intrigued Harford still more, and then the explanation occurred to him.

The sight of a stack of tins beside the shack gave him the clue, and with shining eyes he rapped out an order to land. Crosby obeyed, not in the least knowing what it was all about, until Harford began to talk excitedly to him.

'There's all the petrol we can carry down there, brother,' he said rapidly. 'We've only got to load

up an' fly off. This is the best bit o' luck we struck yet!"

'Gee, you said it!' replied Crosby, realizing at once that this was indeed good fortune for them. 'What d'you think it's doin' there?'

'Some one's cache, I guess.'

'Then some guy'll expect to refuel here and find his juice all gone?'

'I guess so. That's his funeral!'

'It'll be pretty tough for him, whoever he is, to be stranded out here with no juice,' said Crosby.

'I can't help his troubles,' said Harford callously.

'What about the guy in charge here?'

'Well, what about him, brother? You aren't goin' to suggest that two of us aren't a match for him, are you?'

'Nope,' said Crosby. 'I guess we can fix him.'

'I'll say! Look, there's a sort of landing-stage. Shows this dump is used by a plane. Put her down gently, brother.'

Crosby put the Stinson down gently on the still waters of the lake, and taxied up to the little landing-stage. The Indian in charge of the petrol dump came out and caught a rope thrown to him by the pilot, and made it fast. Then he drew the aircraft gently forward, so that the wing swept over the landing-stage, and they could step ashore from the cabin.

'You come from Mr. Crossland?' asked the Indian without much interest. Crosby started a little at the sound of the name, but Harford nodded.

'Yep, we come from Mr. Crossland, and we want all the petrol you got.'

'No take it all,' said the man. 'Other plane come and want some. Take fill-up, that's all.'

'Right you are, brother. You help us to fill up,' said Harford obligingly. The three men worked hard to fill up the tanks of the Stinson, and then the Indian gave a grunt.

'Nuff,' he said.

'Sure,' said Harford with a grin. 'Now, don't I have to sign the book, or something? Crossland said I'd better.'

'Come inside,' said the Indian.

'I got to get my pen from the cabin,' said Harford. 'Come on, Crosby. You be gettin' ready while I sign.'

'Are you satisfied with that lot?' asked Crosby as they crossed the landing-stage together.

'Lay off, can't you?' snarled Harford. 'Get into that plane and get ready to go the minute I come aboard.'

'O.K., pal,' said Crosby peaceably. Harford rummaged in the cabin while the pilot shuffled into his seat. Then the man went back to the shack, and for several minutes disappeared inside.

When he came out again he shouted across to Crosby.

'He says we can take the lot. Come on! Step on it!'

Crosby got out of the cabin and went towards the dump. The Indian did not reappear, and the two men piled all the tins into the tail-end of the

Stinson easily. Just before they set off Harford threw something into the back of the cabin, behind the tins, but what it was Crosby did not see fit to inquire. He hated the whole business, and was afraid to ask what had taken place in the shack while he had sat in the plane, waiting. Had Harford tied the man up and gagged him? If he had it was as good as sentencing him to death, for days might pass before any one went that way and freed him. But there was no finding out anything from Harford. If he desired to tell, he would do so in due course, but if he wished to keep his doings a secret, no amount of questioning from Crosby would elicit a scrap of information.

Without hurry or fuss Harford untied the rope and threw it to Crosby. The plane started to glide back into the lake, but he kept a guiding hand on the wing and restrained it.

'Fer the love of mike, hurry up!' snarled Crosby at last, his nerves jangled to screaming point.

'What's got you, brother? Afraid that Injun'll come out an' say we can't have the petrol after all?'

'I suppose he might,' growled the pilot, switching on his engine and reaching for the self-starting handle.

'Well, you're wrong, brother. He won't come out no more. I'm telling you that. He won't come out no more. He won't lay no information against us. He's quite quiet, brother.'

With growing horror, Crosby started up the engine as Harford settled himself comfortably in the seat beside him. As he turned the plane out

into the lake he could not resist a glance towards the door of the shack, which Harford had closed behind him when he came out. There was something dark on the threshold which had not been there before: a dark stream that issued slowly from inside the shack and made a pool on the white snow.

'You killed him?' muttered Crosby, opening out his engine in an impulse to get away from the silent spot as soon as he could.

'Sure I killed him, brother. Best thing I could have done. Dead men don't talk. Head westward, brother. I guess there are some traps there we could well afford to have a look at.'

CHAPTER XX

A GRIM DISCOVERY

NICK, homeward bound from the radium camp, glanced at his petrol gauge and decided that a fill-up at Sunny Lake would see him safely as far as Rochester. If he did not fill up there he would have to go off his course a little to pick up petrol at Indian Leap. He balanced the two plans in his mind for a moment, decided that it would save time if he refuelled at Sunny Lake, and accordingly turned slightly eastward for ten miles until the gleam of sun on the water told him that he had reached one of Martin Crossland's caches.

He put down the big Bellanca with the minimum of splash, although it was heavily loaded. He was mildly surprised that Black Eagle had not come out to see him in, as he usually did, and when he had taxied to the landing-stage, and still no Indian had appeared, he sent a shout ringing across to the shack with the door that remained so obstinately closed.

There was still no reply, and Nick thought that Black Eagle was possibly away hunting, although this was one of the days on which he was supposed to stay near the petrol dump in case he was required. The boy hesitated a moment, then fished up his rope from the floor of the cabin behind him, and measured the distance to the post on the landing-stage on which Black Eagle usually tied it.

He made a loop at the end, but before he could cast it he noticed something that made him frown

in a very puzzled way. There were several empty tins lying about the landing-stage, but there was no sign of the orderly pile of full ones that should have been standing against the side of the shack.

Nick knew at once that something was wrong, and for a moment or two he did nothing active, but sat back, his eyes scanning the snow round the hut carefully. It puzzled him that there were no signs of footprints on the landward side of the shack, such as would have been evident if thieves had come up with a sledge and taken away the tins. But as his eyes flickered intently over the scene, he saw something else—something that made him feel slightly sick. It was the dark pool in the snow that had told Crosby what had happened.

Nick set his teeth. If some one had been hurt it was his duty to go to his help, whoever it was. It might be one of the men who had stolen the petrol, or it might be Black Eagle. The boy threw the rope with an accuracy he had learned since his arrival in Indian Leap, and the slip knot tightened on the post, so that by pulling on it he drew the Bellanca close enough to the landing-stage for him to get out easily.

He stood warily for a moment as soon as he was on the wooden planks of the landing-stage, but there was no sound to be heard anywhere. Then he advanced quietly to the shack and first looked in through the window. There he saw a figure lying on its face at the side of a little table, and knew that Black Eagle was the victim.

He went in quickly and bent over the man.

He had evidently been dead for some hours, and a frightful wound at the back of his head showed how the murder had been done. Nick glanced about him hurriedly for a weapon, but saw none. Then he saw the radio set that Crossland supplied to all his men at the caches, and determined to get in touch with his employer.

Crossland was in his shack, interviewing the captain of one of his river steamers, when the warning note that was a feature of his sets told him that one of his men wanted to speak to him. Excusing himself to the captain, he put on the earphones, and announced that he was receiving.

'I say, Martin, it's Nick speaking, and a dreadful thing has happened,' said the boy in troubled tones.

'What is it? Have you crashed, buddy?'

'No—it's not me. But Black Eagle has been murdered.'

'What's that?' gasped the startled Crossland.

'I dropped down at Sunny Lake to refuel and found poor old Black Eagle dead on the floor, and all the petrol gone.'

'Hang on, buddy, an' I'll get the trooper.'

Crossland put down the earphones and caught sight of an Indian boy in the doorway. He told him brusquely to run and tell Trooper Curtis that he was wanted at the shack, and then returned to the radio set.

'He'll be right over, buddy,' he said.

'I'm glad he's in Indian Leap,' said Nick with relief in his voice. 'I could pick him up—I've got

enough petrol just to get there. I suppose I'm about three hours away.'

'He came in this morning,' replied Crossland. 'Here he is now.' A light step with a jingle of spurs sounded outside the door, and Trooper Curtis entered with the inevitable whistle on his lips.

'Want me, Martin?' he asked pleasantly.

'Nick wants you, on the radio.'

'O.K.' He put on the earphones that Crossland handed to him, and Nick heard the ghost of a whistle for a second before the trooper spoke.

'What is it, buddy?'

'Black Eagle has been murdered, Trooper.'

'Where are you?'

'Sunny Lake.'

'Tell me what you've found.'

In as few words as possible, but rather agitatedly all the same, Nick told of the appearance of the petrol cache when he arrived, and how he had found the dead Indian. The trooper listened without saying a word until he had finished.

'Was the door shut?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'And you opened it?'

'Yes, but I had my flying gloves on, if you're thinking of finger-prints. There ought to be some on the empty tins, too, but I can't see anything that might have been used as a weapon.'

'Any tracks?'

'None at all.'

'Eh?'

'None whatever.'

'That don't make sense, buddy,' said the trooper after a short whistle. 'Folks don't just drop out of the skies—or, yes, maybe they do! Is it possible for an aeroplane to have landed there, d'you think?'

'Of course!' said Nick in a low voice.

'Well, guess I must see the spot before I try to figure out who done the job. Can you pick me up, buddy?'

'Sure I can,' said Nick heartily. 'I ought to drop my cargo first, though.'

'Where's that?'

'Edmonton.'

'No, buddy—no. The law has commandeered you. You pick me up, an' I'll try an' get hold of Corporal Banks, and we'll clean up at Sunny Lake first of all.'

Nick knew better than to protest, and he was certainly glad to leave that sinister shack, with the still form on the floor. He knew that he had enough petrol to take him to Indian Leap, but he thought with fury of the man or men who could take every drop of the precious fluid and possibly condemn a man to a lonely death in the wilds after a forced landing through lack of petrol.

He forced the pace southwards, and as he had a following wind nearly all the way he made very good time. Trooper Curtis came out to the landing-stage as he tied up, with Corporal Banks and two Indians behind him.

'Guess you'd better dump your cargo here, buddy,' he said. 'The corp. wants to come along, and we must take a couple of Indians and a load

of petrol to make up for what the murderers took.'

'Right, if you say so,' said Nick. 'They tell me radium's risky stuff to handle, though.'

'Well, you bin on the job long enough now to know what they do,' said Crossland quickly. 'And, in case you're worryin', I've bin on the 'phone to Edmonton and told 'em the cargo'll be late. They were agreeable when I told 'em what had happened.'

'That's all right, then,' said Nick with satisfaction. He directed the work of unloading the radium, while Horridge filled up the tanks with petrol. When all the cargo had been taken out the vacant space was filled to capacity with tins of petrol, and then the trooper, the corporal, and the two Indians got in.

Corporal Banks all this time had not said a word, nor did he talk now. Trooper Curtis whistled 'Annie Laurie' and 'Little Old Lady' most of the time, but he also asked Nick a few questions occasionally. He had a small suit-case with him, and the boy guessed that he carried in it things that were to do with the science of detection, and longed to see it opened.

When they arrived the corporal told Nick to circle round slowly several times, for he wanted to observe the lie of the land. When he was satisfied he told him to come down, and a short while later Nick was tying up the rope to the post on the landing-stage, while the Mounties went ashore.

Nick kept well in the background while they

made their inspection. Corporal Banks took several photographs after he had made quite sure that life was extinct, and then told the Indians to bury their unfortunate comrade. Nick was utterly astonished when the corporal read a very short service from a little book over the grave, but concluded that a Mountie apparently has to be ready for anything, and wondered when he would find something that they could not do.

Corporal Banks saw him looking as he returned the book to his tunic pocket, and vouchsafed a brief word of explanation.

'Don't know if he's one of the Father's lot, or Mr. Hetherington's. So I gave him the best of both,' he said.

Trooper Curtis was sprinkling the petrol tins with a white powder and afterwards photographing the prints that rose with startling distinctness into prominence on them. Everything possible was photographed, and every angle of the shack and landing-stage also, and then Nick had to sign a statement prepared by the trooper from what he had told him on the radio.

Nick made a few amendments, and added a few things that he remembered, and then signed. The store petrol was unloaded and Black Eagle's successor put in charge. Trooper Curtis turned to him before they left.

'D'you pack a gun?' he asked quietly.

'Sure I do,' said the Indian with a slow smile.

'Don't hesitate to use it if you get a visit from any one you don't know. As far as I know, no one

has any right to use this dump but young Nick, here. Don't let any one else land.'

There was a certain grimness about the Indian's expression as he promised to obey these instructions. Trooper Curtis need not fear that two Indians would be caught in the same way.

Nick flew the two Mounties to Indian Leap, where he picked up his cargo of radium again, and dropped the remaining Indian. It was getting dark, but he wanted to get down to Edmonton, and Corporal Banks also wanted to get there as soon as possible. Accordingly they set off, with the cameras and other equipment in the suit-case, and presently dropped down over the city, while flares were placed on the river for them to land.

While Nick was handing over the cargo and receiving the official receipt, Banks disappeared towards Police Head-quarters. Nick was not sure if he should wait for the corporal, or if indeed he ought to try to fly back to Indian Leap, at night after such a heavy day. While he was deliberating, his tired mind almost refusing to work properly, a patrolman touched him on the shoulder with his stick.

'The Mountie says you're to wait for him in the café at the corner of East Twenty Second Street,' he said.

'Where's that?' asked Nick wearily.

'Tuckered up, ain't ye? I thought so. Come along an' I'll show ye, buddy.'

Nick followed the kindly patrolman, and was shown the café where he was to wait. He sat down

at a table, realized that he was hungry, and ordered some food. He had been there nearly an hour, and was feeling much better, when the burly figure of the corporal entered.

Banks saw the boy at once, and came over to his table.

'Better?' he asked gruffly.

'Yes, I'm fine,' said Nick with a smile.

'Good. Guess I'll have some grub.' He obtained a good plate of stew and said nothing at all until he had finished it. Then he pulled out a pipe and sighed.

'Fly me back to Indian Leap to-morrow,' he suggested.

'Sure, Corporal. Where do we stop to-night?'

'An' then on to Fort McMurray, where I was when this trouble broke out. To-night? Here. My brother runs this joint. He'll give us a coupla beds.'

It was next morning, after a good night's rest, that Nick remembered the corporal's visit to Police Head-quarters.

'Did you find out anything about the fingerprints?' he asked suddenly as they flew north once more.

'Yep.'

'Any one you knew?'

'Yep.'

'Can you tell me?'

'Yep. Guy called Red Harford, an' another guy, an' I guess the Injun. I know Harford. Guess I'll have to go after him.'

CHAPTER XXI

\$1,000 REWARD

NICK was a little disappointed that life resumed its normal functions after the excitement of his discovery on Sunny Lake, and that his usual passenger- and freight-carrying work filled his days once more. Certainly Corporal Banks and Trooper Curtis disappeared from Indian Leap, and it was supposed that they were on the track of the murderer, but no hint of their doings penetrated to the little town.

The summer was well advanced, and Nick had already sent several little parcels of notes home to Mr. Clayton. The news from London was always the same—that the investigations were held up by lack of money, and that even if the case were reopened the counsels' fees would cost more than they saw any hope of raising at present.

Lou wrote cheerfully from Switzerland, and once asked Nick if he thought she ought to leave school and find a post, so that her earnings, too, could contribute towards establishing their father's innocence. But after a short consideration Nick advised her to stay where she was. He impressed it on her that Mortimer Lester would be hurt if he thought his trouble had spoilt his daughter's chances of a good education. Moreover, with a degree of some sort she would be able to earn more in the long run than if she left school at once and found work.

Infrequent but long letters came from Uncle

Nicholas, and once a brief note, chatty and not very well spelt, from Aunt Hetty. Apparently life was a little difficult, and more than once Nick noted that a \$5 bill would be useful in the household at Moose Jaw, if he could spare it. But he thought of his father, set his jaw, and wrote that unfortunately he could *not* spare it. The first time it happened he was afraid that he had lost his uncle's friendship by his refusal, but he soon found that it made no difference, and came to the conclusion that the request was more a matter of habit than the sign of a real need.

As he was sitting eating his supper in Mathers's store one evening he happened to remark that he had nothing booked up for the following day. Mathers looked at him thoughtfully, and suddenly asked if he could not find some business to do in Edmonton.

'Edmonton?' repeated Nick. 'What for? Do you want to go there?'

Mathers wriggled and looked coy. He picked up a sugar scoop and began to polish it thoughtfully.

'I never bin to Edmonton,' he said, with a sideways glance at the boy. 'Fine place, I guess, eh?'

'Very fine,' said Nick, tucking into his supper.

'Shops, eh? Bigger than my store, I don't doubt.'

'Much bigger,' said Nick. 'And cinemas and all sorts of things. Great electric signs that blaze at night and make it seem like daytime. Oh, Edmonton's a fine place.'

'It must be,' said Mathers. 'I never bin there.'

It dawned on Nick that he was being very dense, and he pulled himself together.

'Well, I'll find out if Martin wants anything there, and if he does maybe you'd care to come along?' he asked.

'Well, I dunno,' said Mathers, hesitatingly. 'I uster think I'd like to get outa this dump an' see the world, but—shucks!—I do very well here after all. You never know what might not happen in a place like Edmonton. Might get bumped off by a street car. I see in the *Mercury* lots of guys gets bumped off in the streets. Must be a desprit place, I guess.'

'Haven't you been to any towns?' asked Nick wonderingly.

'Nope, buddy, an' strange to say I've never wanted to till now. Just lately, seein' you dashin' off to Edmonton jus' as easy as fallin' off a log, made me get what they calls the itch to travel, I guess. But I dunno as I want to, after all. I do very well here.'

'I suggest you come with me to Edmonton and get in some stores,' said Nick slowly. 'You'd find some grand things there to put in your store.'

'Mebbe you're right,' said Mathers, brightening.

So it was settled, and on the following day Nick consulted with Crossland, who was hugely amused at the thought of Mathers branching out for the first time in his life, and choosing Edmonton as the place from which to see the world. He

made up his mind to come too, and the trio set off in good time to get to the city at about midday.

As they circled above it in the Fox Moth, Reuben Mathers kept his face pressed to the cabin window, and little ejaculations popped out of his mouth from time to time.

'Wal, fer cryin' out loud!—Aw, shucks! Call this a city—it's the whole world! Gosh old hemlock, I don't believe this, Martin. Guess the kid's twistin' us. That ain't Edmonton—it's a picture, surely.'

Martin, shaking with laughter, assured the puzzled old man that it really was Edmonton, and then Rube was anxious for the plane to put down and let him have a look at it close up. As soon as Nick put down on the river Rube would have plunged out of the cabin door, but Crossland restrained him until a launch came out to take them off. He stood still on the quay and his eyes narrowed. Then he threw back his shoulders and spat with studied contempt.

'Guess our jetty at Indian Leap is a sight better than this, Martin,' he said.

'Sure,' agreed Crossland, grinning cheerfully.

'Why——' began Nick, but Crossland silenced him with a mighty dig in the ribs.

'Even Edmonton don't upset Rube's equilibrium,' he said gravely. 'He ain't taken in. Edmonton can't scare him. Indian Leap can still show 'em a thing or two, eh, Rube?'

'You're dern right,' said the old man doggedly. He stuck out his chin, and preserved his appear-

ance of superiority nearly all the time that they were in the town, only losing it on rare occasions when they saw something that really took his breath away.

The shops were an irresistible magnet to him, and he announced that he'd brought plenty of money with him, and intended to stock up while he was there. A woman's hat shop was the first to take his fancy, and he stood outside with his nose glued to the window while Crossland and Nick vainly tried to drag him away.

'I got to have some of those,' he said, and bolted into the shop, followed by his faithful companions, who found him disputing with a magnificent female, who thought he was mad. He was telling her seriously that her models were only worth ten cents, instead of the ten dollars she was charging, and that the feathers on some of them were 'punk', which she rightly regarded as an insult.

Crossland dragged him away, Mathers protesting indignantly that he had made the 'dame' a fair offer, and that she should rightly have accepted it.

'If she didn't know them feathers was punk she oughta be grateful,' he insisted.

'I guess she knew, Rube.'

'Then she ought to be shot.'

'Look at these,' said Nick, pointing thoughtlessly to a jeweller's window.

'Now, them's dandy,' said the old man admiringly. 'I seen Indian squaws dressed up in stuff not half as fine as them thar. Guess them beads would go down well at Indian Leap.'

'Wake up, Rube,' said Crossland, dryly. 'Can't you read? See the ticket? Real diamonds—you haven't got enough dollars in all the world to buy that bunch.'

'No bunch of sparklers, diamonds or not, is worth that amount,' decided Mathers with his wise old head on one side. 'Guess that feller's stringing the folks along.'

'Well, if he can, good luck to him,' said Crossland. 'Here's something more in our line. A ten-cent store. Come on, Rube!'

At last the old man found something wholly delightful, and said so. The strings of brightly coloured beads and the gay brooches and rings fascinated him, and he bought quite a considerable quantity. The girls behind the counter at first thought he was joking when he said he'd take a couple of dozen strings of beads, but after he had wandered round the store for nearly an hour, and bought more than the three of them could carry with comfort, they gathered at the door to watch his progress up the road.

Crossland now took charge and led the way to a first-class restaurant. Here a bowing waiter placed the bill of fare before them, and stood rubbing his hands, as they cogitated over it. Crossland and Nick both chose delicacies that they were unable to get at Indian Leap, but when the waiter asked Mathers if he had decided, the old man pushed the menu away contemptuously.

'I don't understand all that guff,' he said determinedly. 'You bring me a good plate of pork and

beans, buddy, and some waffles and molasses afterwards.'

The waiter looked horrified, but Crossland grinned and nodded, and the old man's order was carried out. He ate the plateful rapidly and then sniffed.

'Better pork and better beans in Indian Leap,' he said heavily. 'Where are them waffles?'

The waffles came up to standard, and he ate four portions. The waiter was watching him with slightly bulging eyes as he demolished the last plateful, and seemed to be expecting something to happen. But the old man merely leant back in his chair, stroked his waistcoat, and grinned at Nick.

'You oughta have more respec' for your innards than to put that sort o' muck into 'em,' he said in a loud and cheerful voice. Several diners looked up, and the waiter started forward with a groan.

'Not but what the young can *di*-gest anything,' he went on, ignoring Nick's scarlet face. 'I'm surprised at you, though, Martin. You're old enough to know better than to eat stuff what you don't know the come-from. I wouldn't!'

'Come on, old man, and we'll do some more shopping,' said Crossland hurriedly, aware of the sensation they were causing.

'What's your hurry? I'm quite comfortable here. I'll have a pipe before we go.'

But the sight of the broken, blackened old pipe was too much for the waiter, and he stepped forward firmly.

'No smoking in the dining-room, sir,' he said, not even quailing when Mathers fixed him with a thunderous eye. 'It's the rule, sir,' he added. Crossland backed him up, and together they persuaded the slightly indignant Mathers, with his armful of various parcels, to step out on to the sidewalk. Crossland paid the bill, and the waiter went straight into the kitchen and poured himself out a strong cup of coffee, muttering to himself in choice Italian as he did so.

That day was an endless delight to Nick, for Mathers would not be content until he had bought a considerable quantity of stores, most of them highly unsuitable, for Indian Leap. He insisted that his home town was far finer in every respect than Edmonton—the fact that there were no street cars there rather added to its glory, as from the very first he distrusted the vehicles—though he admitted freely that in respect of its shops Indian Leap had a bit to learn. But he was resolved that in future Indian Leap should compare favourably even in that, and with that end in view he bought lavishly, but mostly from ten-cent stores.

They were passing a police station on their way back to the river where the plane was moored, when Nick came to a sudden halt. He had seen a notice with photograph attached, and he felt that he had seen the depicted man somewhere. He drew Crossland's attention to it, and Martin remembered at once.

'It's that guy who was with the flier, Crosby,

he said. 'You brought them along, and we fixed up their plane for them.'

'I remember now,' said the boy. 'And I remember the corporal mentioned him, too. Hartford. So that's the guy they think bumped off poor old Black Eagle.'

'There's a reward,' said Reuben Mathers keenly. 'Look! \$1,000! That's worth goin' after, Nick. Think what you could do fer yer father with all that money.'

'No good thinking of it,' said Nick gruffly. 'I haven't got time to go chasing all over Canada for murderers. I shouldn't know what to do with him if I caught him, either. But I hope the corporal gets him. A man like that wants stopping before he does some wholesale damage. He's started with killing one man, and I guess it won't stop at that.'

CHAPTER XXII

THE RIFLED TRAPS

LIFE went on quietly for some days, after the visit to Edmonton, and then came another excitement for Nick. He had flown a party and some gear up to a settlement well beyond the Great Slave Lake, where snow still lay quietly everywhere although the rivers were flowing free from ice. He had got rid of his passengers and freight, and was taking a little exercise before setting off again, when he noticed a flurry of snow in the distance, and stood still to see what it was.

Some distance up the trail a dog-team was coming towards the town with great speed. A few folks gathered to watch its arrival with mild interest, and as it got nearer Nick was reminded of another arrival some time ago when the break-up began.

He could hear the hoarse shouts of the man in charge of the team of dogs, and presently words were audible.

'Holà! Holà! Holà! Where are ze Mounties? Where are ze police? There is thieves in ze forests! Holà!'

These shouts, and others in the same strain, came clearly across the snow and brought several more men into the group that was waiting.

'That's Jean Latour,' said one man. 'Wonder what's bitin' him.'

'Seems like he's mad at something,' volunteered another. The speculation increased, and when at

last the dog-team went past into the town in a flurry of snow they fell in behind it and trotted in the slow lope that yet manages to cover the ground at astonishing speed, until Jean pulled up his team outside the Mounted Police post.

Nick had followed too, and now joined the crowd that surged after Latour. The boy had a vision of the excitable little man swinging off the top of an empty sledge and charging up the steps, where a corporal, his eyebrows raised with astonishment, met him.

'Thieves! Thieves!' shouted Latour, waving his arms madly in the air.

'Hello, Jean. What's all this?' asked a new voice, and the amazed face of Trooper Curtis appeared over the corporal's shoulder.

'Ah, trooper, you are here, hein? It is glad I am to see you. Now somet'ing will be done. You vill catch zem. And I vill hang zem with my own hands!'

'Come inside,' said the corporal laconically. 'We better take down what you say, Latour, before we hang any one. What's been going on?'

'Where are your pelts, Jean?' called out one of the men in the crowd on the station steps, fearing that they would not hear the story if the excited little man went inside with the Mounties. 'You've bin gone a week, and you ain't got no pelts at all.'

'Zat is vot I say,' shrieked Latour, whirling round to face the upturned faces. 'All my traps empty. All my pelts gone. Zis has nefer happened to me before. I—Jean Latour—I haf been

robbed. Zis is too more zan terrible. It is of the most too bad.'

'But are you sure there was anything in the traps to take?' asked Nick incredulously.

'Somesings in my traps? Ah, but listen to heem! Listen to the infant zat knows nozings. I tell you always zere is somesings in my traps. Always.'

'Mightn't the animals have moved or something?'

'Buddy, you just don't know what you're talking about,' said one of the men impatiently. 'If Jean says his traps have bin robbed, well, he's right, and that's all there is to it, I guess.'

'I tell you zere was ze dead bodies of ze animals, skinned, and ze pelts gone. I ask you, is zat thieves or is it not?'

'Sure that's thieves, Latour,' said the corporal gravely. 'Guess we'd better take a look at the locality. How far from here, Jean?'

'Two days wiz my fast team. I do not know vot your teams can do.'

'Guess we can match up to that,' smiled the corporal. 'Eh, Curtis?'

Trooper Curtis whistled a few bars.

'Guess I can beat it,' he said with a wide grin.

'You can, eh? Oh, yes, you can!' raged Latour. 'First thieves say zey can steal my pelts and get away vith it, and zen a fat peeg of a Mountie say he can beat my dogs. Oh, yes! It is enough. I say no more.'

'Well, with young Nick's help I guess it can be done,' drawled Curtis. Latour's face lit up at once.

'Nick? He is here vith his aeroplane? Ah, we get more and more modern! It is good zis time. He vill fly us to find ze thieves, eh?'

'Sure I will,' said the boy heartily. 'Let's go.'

The Mounties shuffled into their heavy overcoats, seized their big gloves, and ran down the steps. The crowd made way for them, all talking eagerly, and several hands clapped Nick on the shoulder and congratulated him on his chance to help the police track down the thieves. All were very sure of success, for they realized that no dogsledge could make enough speed to get out of the range of the aircraft in the short time that must have elapsed since the rifling of the traps. The corporal took handcuffs in the capacious pockets of his overcoat.

The Bellanca sat squat on the water, the usual Arctic hood over the engine, and the oil keeping warm in a shack near the tiny jetty that gave on to the lake. In Indian Leap these precautions were now unnecessary, but up beyond the snow-line Nick had still to observe the utmost caution.

His passengers packed themselves in while he went through the tedious routine of getting his engine ready for flight. Jean Latour was in a fever of impatience, and screamed aloud to him to hurry several times, but the Mounties sat like monuments of patience, Curtis whistling softly all the time that Nick kept them waiting.

At last they were off the water and roaring across the snow in the direction from which the trapper had entered the town. Nick kept an eye

on his compass and chart, the Mounties watched the ground below, and presently Latour gave an exclamation.

'But it is here! My first traps was here! Two days it took me wiz my dogs to get from here, and now it is not an hour zat we are in zis aeroplane. Truly we are modern! We must go down here, my young friend.'

'I'm looking for a patch of water to come down on,' said Nick quietly.

'Pity you haven't got skis,' commented Curtis.

'Well, here's a stream that I guess will do,' said the boy. He dived down to within a few feet of the water and flew round, scanning it closely before deciding to trust to it. Sure at last that it was suitable, he put the plane down, and soon it was anchored and they were tramping back across the snow towards the spot designated by Latour.

The Mounties made a thorough investigation, but one thing puzzled them exceedingly. There were no tracks except those made by Latour. There, sure enough, was the empty trap, and there the skinned carcass of the silver fox that had been caught in it. But except for a few footprints round about it, there was nothing to show how the thieves had got there, nor the direction from which they had come.

'Snow-shoes, I guess,' said the corporal thoughtfully.

'Yep, but how did they take the pelts? I admit you can tote one or two and get along quite nicely,

but not a load like Latour says he's missed. Let's get along a bit.'

They searched very comprehensively, but found nothing of any use in tracking the thieves. Both Mounties began to look very grave, and finally Curtis asked if there had been a fall of snow there within the last few weeks.

Latour shook his head.

'No snow at all,' he declared. 'The sky has been as clear as you see it now. Clear nights vith stars. No snow at all.'

'Well, it's a puzzle,' said Trooper Curtis.

Nick flew them back to the settlement and then, finding that there was nothing more that he could do, set off for Indian Leap, where he was already some hours behind schedule. Latour and the Mounties set out separately with their dog-teams for a wider search of the district, hoping to come across the thieves red-handed somewhere, and anticipating a few months, possibly, on the trail.

When the boy got back to Indian Leap he found Father Benet chatting with Crossland and Mathers, and to them he told the tale of Latour's misfortune. All three looked grave, and Reuben waxed tremendously indignant on the subject of thieves.

'Thar ain't nothin' bad enough fer a guy who'll steal another guy's pelts,' he declared vehemently.

'I am very sorry for Latour,' said the Father thoughtfully. 'It will mean a great loss for him.'

'It sure will if all his traps have bin seen to,' agreed Crossland.

'Where is he now, my son?' asked Father Benet.

'He went out again with his team,' said Nick. 'The Mounties went too.'

'Did they go together?' asked Crossland.

'I don't think so. I heard them settling which district each of them would take. Jean Latour has just gone to inspect the rest of his traps, but the Mounties are looking for the thieves.'

'Have they any clues, my son?'

'I'm afraid not, sir,' said Nick ruefully. 'It was so queer—there weren't any traces of a sledge or dogs or anything like that. The corporal said they must have come on snow-shoes, but they couldn't think how they could have got away with a load of pelts without a sledge or anything.'

'There may have bin a big gang of them,' suggested Mathers.

'Sure, that's it,' said Crossland gloomily. 'It sure is dern bad luck on poor old Jean. An' he's one of the best trappers in Alberta.'

'He says he's *the* best,' grinned Nick.

'He may be right, too. He should know! But I must admit it makes me real sore to hear of a dirty trick like that being played on him. Somehow that ain't usual. You set your traps and you take from your own traps, but you don't touch the other feller's. Seems to me there's some bad men in our part of the world at last.'

The story of Jean Latour's loss made conversation for a long time in Reuben's store, and each

time any new-comer arrived at the town he was immediately told the news. At first astonishment and indignation reigned whenever the tale was told, but one day a morose elderly man who had been trapping in northern Alberta for forty years nodded thoughtfully.

'Five of mine were taken too,' he said slowly. 'I didn't say nothing at first, as you was so quick with your story, but you can take it from me that there's some pretty rotten skunks about somewhere, and pretty spry ones, too. I couldn't find no trails nowhere.'

'Nor could Jean Latour,' put in Nick eagerly.

The old man looked at him with disfavour.

'What d'you know about what Jean could find and what he couldn't?' he growled. 'Think he's goin' ter tell a kid everythin'?'

'I was with him and the two Mounties when they were looking for tracks,' said Nick, rather nettled.

'That don't prove nothing.'

'Nick's O.K.,' said Reuben Mathers with a wide grin. 'Nick's a pal of mine. Him and me went to Edmonton and near bought up the town. An' he's a pal of Jean's, too. Don't you bother about Nick, old-timer.'

The old man grumbled a bit but left the boy alone since Mathers spoke for him. He was badly hit by the theft of his pelts and was naturally not inclined to be pleasant about it. He went to the Mounted Police post and reported the loss to a young trooper who had taken over during Curtis's absence, and that was the end of it as far as he was

concerned. But all over Canada the news was flashed by radio, and Mounties in remote posts up in the frozen north made a note of the fact and prepared to go out and look for the gang who were on the despicable game of rifling the hard-working trappers' pelts.

CHAPTER XXIII

A FIGHT

ONCE a month Nick flew north to the radium camp for his regular freight, and each time he kept a look-out for Jean Latour. Trooper Curtis presently returned to Indian Leap, having found no traces of the thieves, but Corporal Banks remained on the trail. Two men could not be spared when the chances of catching the criminals were so remote.

But Nick was always hopeful of seeing something of the thieves as he flew over the trackless, snowy wastes, over spruce forests and uncharted small rivers and lakes. He flew by compass, and sometimes varied his course a little in order to explore some new area where he hoped to find the criminals.

He was on his way to the camp one morning when he saw something strange going on below him. He had started out in the bright dawn, and by the time he had reached the snow lands the sunlight was sparkling almost unbearably on the white carpet below. He had been singing with the sheer joy of flight on a sunny morning, when each sharp spruce spear is white-tipped, and when the snow crystals catch the light and sparkle like so many diamonds.

Life was good, reflected Nick. And then he saw a dark smudge on the ground some way ahead. He put down the nose of the Bellanca, ever hopeful of finding some clue to the trap thieves. But as he

got nearer he saw that there were three men struggling on the snow, and that a sledge stood near, with a team of dogs waiting patiently.

As Nick dived he became aware that one of the men was Jean Latour. Then the men who were fighting with him might well be the thieves! He opened his throttle and roared down in a power dive, and the men drew apart, startled by the suddenness of his appearance. They had been so occupied with their struggle that they had not heard him before.

As the men sprang apart one of them fell to the ground, and Nick was now low enough to see that it was Latour who fell. He roared towards the men, zigzagging crazily in an effort to hit them with the short bottom wing of the aircraft, but it was an impossible task, and he soon stopped as they dashed into a belt of trees where he could not possibly follow.

He zoomed up in a climbing turn, and went back over the place where the struggle had been going on. He saw with horror that Latour was still lying where he had fallen, and saw, too, that a dark stream was staining the snow by his side.

Full of horror, Nick turned aside to find a spot that he could land on, and at that moment saw with astonishment an aeroplane rising from behind the belt of trees. He climbed a little, and saw the gleam of water, and at once headed in that direction. As he approached he saw that the plane was a Stinson, but it vanished too rapidly for him to see the identification letters.



The men drew apart, startled by the suddenness of his appearance

He wondered for a moment if he could catch the smaller plane if he followed it with the Bellanca. He did not know the difference in their relative speeds, but even if he had been sure of catching up with it he knew that his duty was to Latour, who was lying wounded on the snow. Whether he was alive or dead he could not tell, but he must find that out as speedily as possible.

He came down on the water with a little less than his usual care, and sent up a huge wave from each pontoon. With all speed he threw out his anchor, and then found that in their haste the villains had left behind their collapsible boat. This saved a little time, and he managed to hook it and got in, rowing himself to land with the short paddle that was lying in it.

He scrambled up the bank and ran through the trees towards Latour. He knelt down anxiously, the dark pool on the snow filling him with dread, and looked eagerly into the drawn, still face. Could the trapper really be dead? How was he to find out? For all the freedom and adventure of the past months, Nick had not yet got used to the idea that people die, and he felt terribly helpless as he realized that it was up to him to do something for Latour.

Setting his teeth, he took hold of the trapper's wrist and tried to find the pulse. To his immense relief, he felt it almost at once; by sheer good luck rather than by any knowledge he had got his fingers on the right spot. Latour's heart was beating slowly and with great labour, but it was still beating.

'If he lies here he'll die, and if I try to move him he may die, too,' muttered Nick. He thought with longing of the cool confidence of Trooper Curtis when faced with wounds or other emergencies, and then he began to remember some of the things he had seen the trooper do long ago in the settlement on Cree Lake.

With a very white face Nick turned the trapper carefully until the ugly hole in the man's jacket was uppermost. Then he untied the fastenings with shaking fingers, and presently laid bare a deep knife-wound.

He stared helplessly as the blood welled slowly up, but in a moment he pulled out his handkerchief and made a pad, which he fastened in position with his muffler. When he was sure that the pad was held in position tightly he did up the coat again, and then realized that he would have to carry Latour to the aeroplane.

But first of all there were the dogs to consider. They would not be satisfied long to remain there, but would wander when their master was taken off, and soon be lost. He found the end of the trace and tied it firmly to a tree, then gently raised Latour on to his back and started off to the river.

It had seemed a very small distance through the trees when he was running, but it was very far with all Latour's weight on his back. Branches and twigs caught and slapped at him as he passed, and he was crimson with exertion by the time he got to the water's edge.

He could never remember quite how he

managed to get the unconscious man into the plane, but at long last he was off the water and flying fast for home. He was desperately afraid that Latour would die in spite of his efforts, and he raced the engine unmercifully in his anxiety to get to Indian Leap in time.

An astonished Crossland was out on the jetty as he came down on the water, ready to catch the rope he threw, and ready, too, to ask what was wrong.

'It's Jean Latour,' the boy jerked out. 'He's hurt badly, Martin. I saw two chaps scrapping with him, and when I got down they'd knifed him. I say, Martin—he won't die, will he?'

'How the heck do I know?' said Crossland gruffly. He climbed into the cabin of the *Bellanca* and bent over the still form. 'He isn't dead yet, buddy, anyway,' he added more gently. 'Get Mathers and the trooper, will you? And send a kid to tell Father Benet.'

Nick hurried off, and, encountering Horridge on the way, told him jerkily what had happened, and asked him to see that Father Benet was informed. Then he hurried off to get Mathers and the trooper.

Both were shocked and amazed at the boy's story, but while Reuben asked questions in a continual volley as they jog-trotted back to the jetty, the trooper whistled more or less gaily all the time, which only showed, as Nick now knew, that he was thinking deeply.

They found that the resourceful Horridge had

improvised a stretcher, and that he and Crossland were lifting Latour on to it. With infinite care the three of them got him out, Mathers offering advice and Nick hovering in the background as they did so. They were carrying him slowly down to the little hospital when Father Benet, hatless and agitated, met them.

'What has happened, my son?' he asked with deep concern. Nick once again told his story briefly, but the good Father did not listen very assiduously. He was watching the still face, usually so mobile but now frozen into the very similitude of death.

When Latour had been placed on a bed the stretcher-bearers withdrew, leaving him in the Father's capable hands. Trooper Curtis placed a large hand on Nick's shoulder.

'I want your statement, buddy,' he said.

'There are two things I've got to do,' said Nick restlessly.

'What are they?'

'I've got to get those dogs and the sledge back here, and I've got to get up to the radium camp to fulfil my contract. And I'm darned late, Trooper!'

'Tell you what,' said the trooper after whistling a bar or two softly, 'I'll come with you to pick up the dogs. Maybe I can be useful there, and certainly the sooner I get a look at the place where it happened the better all round. And I can take your statement as we fly along, eh?'

'Jolly good idea,' said the boy heartily. He went off down to the jetty, where he found Horridge

filling up the tanks with petrol, and nearly fell down at this sign of solicitude.

'Thanks,' he said briefly. 'Rotten luck for poor old Latour, wasn't it?'

'Boloney,' grunted the engineer. 'If folks will go out and risk their silly selves fer a lot of silly furs I ain't got nothin' to say. Lot o' foolishness!'

'You don't care for Latour, then?' queried Nick.

'He's no worse than any one else,' said the man morosely. 'Guess she'll do now.' He took away the empty tins, and Nick laughed softly as he watched him go. Horridge disapproved solidly of everything and everybody, but that did not stop him from being mighty helpful on occasions.

Trooper Curtis came smartly down to the jetty with the case in which he carried his camera and other instruments in his hand. He got into the cabin and immediately brought out a notebook and pencil.

'Step on the gas, kid,' he said briefly. 'As soon as we're off the water I'll take your deposition.'

Once again Nick told his story, but this time in detail. When he mentioned the Stinson the trooper's eyes narrowed and he paused.

'Who flies a Stinson?' he asked slowly.

'Well, that chap Crosby did. And you know the fellow who was with him that time was the chap Corporal Banks says did the Sunny Lake murder.'

'You don't say!' drawled the trooper. 'Corp. never pinned that killing on to any one fer certin, I know!'

'He said that Harford's finger-prints were on the tins,' said Nick obstinately.

'Mebbe they were, but it would take more than that to convince a jury, buddy. He may have bin there, an' he may have handled the tins, but there was others there too, and how d'you or the corp. or any one else know whose hand did the job? Come to that, we haven't found the weapon yet, let alone any finger-prints on it!'

'Well, the fact is that Crosby and Harford were flying a Stinson, and it was a Stinson that I saw rising from the river after I'd chased the chaps into the trees. I don't mind betting it was the same two did both jobs.'

'Mebbe, but you got to get better evidence than that to convince a jury,' repeated Curtis, and proceeded to write down the rest of Nick's statement.

He went over the ground very thoroughly as soon as they got there, and then helped the boy to load the sledge and dogs into the plane. After that they set off for Indian Leap once more, where the trooper's first action was to get Corporal Banks by radio and tell him what had happened.

The trooper got into touch with several posts in the part of the world in which the corporal was believed to be, and was fortunate in finding him at Fort Fitzwilliam beyond the Great Slave Lake. Banks was keenly interested, and inclined to take Nick's suspicions as being well founded. But he, too, agreed that it would be necessary to find the weapon with which the murder of the Indian was

committed before the crime could actually be brought home to the murderer.

Tired, but still tremendously excited, Nick now set off once more for the radium camp. He had aimed on getting there in daylight, but now he knew that it would be night before he dropped down on the lake. However, he had flares with him, and did not fear the night landing at all.

An irascible manager met him in somewhat sketchy attire as he came ashore, nearly dropping with weariness, but Nick's explanation satisfied him, and he led the boy to a bunk where he fell at once into a dreamless sleep. He was up and away with his cargo early the next morning, somewhat to the manager's annoyance, for the man had wanted to hear every detail of the accident to Latour. But Nick wanted to get back to see how his friend was getting on.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRAPPER'S STORY

JEAN LATOUR was conscious when Nick crept into the little hospital ward after he had finished his business in Edmonton. The radium had been duly delivered and the money collected. Then Nick had raced back to Indian Leap, and begged Father Benet to let him see the trapper.

'He is very weak, my son,' said the Father kindly. 'Do not tire him. But he will be pleased to see you.'

Jean's face was white and drawn, but he managed a smile as the boy approached his bed.

'You safe my life, hein?' he whispered. 'I am grateful. I vill buy two candles and light zem to St. Anthony for you.'

'I'm jolly glad I happened to come along at the right time,' said Nick, flushing. 'Don't thank me, Jean. I only wish I could have caught the blighters too.'

The door of the ward opened softly, and Trooper Curtis looked in. Seeing that Nick appeared to be holding a conversation with the wounded man, he came right in, closing the door behind him and removing his Stetson.

'How are you feelin', old-timer?' he asked softly.

'Me, I am fine,' declared Latour in a weak whisper, but with the ghost of a smile on his lips.

'Will it tire you too much to make a statement? We can't do much till we get your side of it, you see.'

'I vill tell you all. Come close so I can whisper.'

'Do you want me to go?' asked Nick wistfully.

'You, Nick, get me a drink and make up ze stove,' said Latour. The boy hurried to carry out the instruction, and held a cup of lemonade to the trapper's white lips. Latour took a few sips and lay back with his eyes closed, mustering his strength. Then, in slow and halting sentences, he told his story.

He had found a patch where the traps had not been disturbed, and was congratulating himself on the fact that the thieves had not penetrated so far, when, speeding silently over the snow, he had seen the distant forms of two men, busily skinning an animal, while an empty trap stood not far off.

He had given a bellow of rage, which caused the men to turn sharply towards him. Urging his dogs to their greatest speed, he had raced towards the couple, shouting hoarse threats as he advanced. Two shots were fired, which went wide, and then he was upon them. He threw himself off the sledge, which went careering on until the traces got mixed up with the runners, and sprang at the nearest man.

The fight was not long, but it was fierce. Latour had realized from the fact that they had fired at him that they were desperate men, but he was so blinded by fury that it did not occur to him to think that they were two to one.

He had not heard the aeroplane at all. The knife had done its work before Nick was directly overhead, and he had felt his senses swimming and just realized that the men had gone, before oblivion overtook him.

That was Latour's story. Soon after his reception into the hospital, he had recovered consciousness to see Father Benet bending over him. His magnificent constitution, hardened by a life in the wilds, kept him alive when many other men would have died from loss of blood. For some time he could not understand why he was there, nor what had happened, but he had infinite faith in the Father, and did obediently all that he was told.

After a refreshing sleep he had felt much better, and now memory began to return. With memory came anger, and then curiosity. Father Benet had definitely forbidden anger, as injurious to his present condition, but he had satisfied the curiosity, and the emotional little French-Canadian had wept tears of gratitude when he heard how the boy had brought him back to Indian Leap, and not him only, but also his dogs.

When Trooper Curtis had finished taking down Latour's statement, he began gently to ask some questions. Mainly they dealt with the appearance of the two men who had robbed his traps and attacked him, but necessarily Latour's description was rather vague.

One of the men described might well have been Harford, although it was not accurate enough in detail, for Latour had only really seen the man while they were fighting. The other man puzzled him, for he said that he had seen him before somewhere, but could not call to mind where.

Seeing that Latour was getting restless owing to his inability to remember where he had seen the

man before, Curtis tried another tack, and asked if the trapper had any idea how the men had got to the spot where he had surprised them. Latour moved his head slightly.

'That has made me think, too,' he said wearily, in the weak voice that was little more than a breath. 'They had no sledge. Zey had snow-shoes, yes. But nosings to carry my good pelts. And I see no ozzer pelts, too. I do not understand it.'

'Listen, Jean,' said Curtis, leaning forward. 'You was here when Nick brought a chap in that he'd found by a wrecked plane out in the wilds somewhere, before the break-up, wasn't you?'

'Yes.' Latour looked puzzled and tired.

'Did you see the guy?'

'I t'ink so.' Latour lay with closed eyes, a slight frown creasing his seamed face, evidently seeing no connexion between what the trooper had just asked him and his own misfortune. Then suddenly his eyes opened, bright and piercing as of old. 'But it was heem!' he said, his voice a little stronger than it had been all the time. 'Sure, Trooper, it was heem. Ze man zat Nick bring in—he it was zat fight wiz me. Now I know. And I vill get heem. I—Jean Latour—vill get heem!'

'Don't you worry, Jean; I'll get him for you,' said the trooper grimly, putting away his pocket-book. 'Now you get a rest. When you're better maybe we shall want to ask you a few more questions, but I guess you're all in now.'

Father Benet came in as the trooper left, with some gruel in a bowl for his patient. He drove

Nick out, but promised that he should come in on the following day, for he noticed with some concern that Latour looked extremely weary now that the excitement of remembering Crosby had left him.

Indian Leap now found itself a centre of attraction for some time. In the strange way that news travels in wild places, every one seemed to have heard of the attack on Jean Latour, and men hitched up their dog-teams and travelled for days to get to a place where they could hear an authoritative account of what had happened. Farmers in remote smallholdings, hearing garbled accounts from wandering Indians, hitched up the farm pony into the ancestral buggy, and drove over to the little town to see Mathers. Settlers, prospectors, and trappers turned their footsteps towards Indian Leap to inquire if they could see Latour, or, failing him, the young pilot who had rescued him.

Mathers was, of course, in his element with all this excitement. If he told the story of the rescue once, he told it a hundred times, and if it varied a little in the telling, that must be put down to artistic appreciation. Nick was amazed one day when two grizzled trappers begged to be shown the Colt with which he shot dead two of the five men who were attacking Latour.

'You've got this wrong,' said Nick, colouring. 'That old skunk Rube has been stringing you guys along, I guess. There wasn't any gun-play, and there were only two men on to Jean. I scared 'em off with the aeroplane.'

'It was a better story the other way, buddy,' said one of the men sadly.

'Guess that's the story I'm going to stick to,' said the other man. 'My pard, he says to go an' get the low-down on this tale about Latour, an' I guess I'll tell him just exactly what Rube told me!'

'You're comin' along with your Canadian, buddy,' was Crossland's comment. 'The big man was standing near by when the trappers spoke to Nick. 'Guess those guys couldn't tell you was English at all.'

'I can speak English when I want to,' grinned Nick. 'But I'm practising Canadian on long, lonely flights in the Bellanca, when there's no one else there.'

'Boloney!' said Crossland promptly.

'You're dern right!' said Nick.

Reuben Mathers was annoyed when he found that Nick was not backing up his flamboyant stories, and told the lad plainly that he was crazy to take the line he was taking.

'It sounds good the way I tell it,' he complained. 'The way you tell it, it's just ordinary stuff that might happen to any one. You just *got* to embroider a bit, buddy.'

'Not me, thanks,' said Nick, grinning.

'Well, you're plumb crazy,' grumbled the old man.

'What about all that stuff you bought in Edmonton?' asked Nick, changing the subject. 'Sold any yet?'

'Have I sold any yet? Have I sold——? Say,

buddy, what's the big idea? Are you tryin' to tell me that the folks in Indian Leap ain't got the buyin' capacity of the folks in Edmonton? 'Cause if so, I'm tellin' you that what you want is town-pride, see?'

'I'm asking you something,' said Nick, quite unperturbed. 'Have you sold any yet?'

'Ain't I tellin' you? Five strings of beads,' said Mathers with a slight twinkle in his eyes.

'And those were to a squaw, I suppose.'

'Right again, buddy. But I should worry! They give the store an air, don't they? Put a bit o' city class into Indian Leap, I guess. I don't know as I want to sell 'em, they're so pretty!'

CHAPTER XXV

CROOKS IN CONFERENCE

To say that Crosby was terrified after the fight with Jean Latour would be putting it mildly. He was literally shaking with terror as he hauled the Stinson off the lake, and flew southwards blindly, at a height that barely cleared the tree-tops.

After a while Harford spoke to him roughly, bidding him get more height, and he obeyed without a word. When they had put roughly a hundred miles between them and the place where the encounter had occurred, Harford noticed a little straggling town below them, and curtly ordered Crosby to land.

The pilot pulled himself together sufficiently to look about for a stretch of water, which was soon found. It is obvious that in the wilds a town or settlement must be built very near to its water-supply, and as Canada is honeycombed with rivers, this is not difficult. Crosby found a wide, slow stream to the north of the little town, and put down with a somewhat erratic career over the surface, before remembering to switch off his engine.

Harford brought out a bottle of crude spirit from a locker in the cabin, and gave the pilot a liberal dose of it. Crosby shuddered as he tossed it down, but the colour began to come back into his chalky face and his hands steadied.

'I'm oke, Red,' he muttered.

'You'd better be, brother,' said the other man

menacingly. 'Come ashore and we'll book a room at the hotel. We got to talk this over.'

The smallest of settlements boasts a saloon, or hotel, in which casual travellers are sometimes content to put up with a fifth share in a room for a night. Harford soon found one in the little town, and inquired first of all where he was, and where was the nearest Mountie post.

'This is Santa Lucy, stranger,' said the saloon-keeper with a faint look of surprise. His long, drooping grey moustache and bushy eyebrows somehow managed to make him look eternally astonished. 'An' as fer a Mountie post, guess yo'll have ter go a stretch to find one. 'Thar's one on Trout River somewhere, but I can't figure just whar at the moment. 'They comes an' they goes, you know, stranger. We doesn't trouble 'em much at Santa Lucy.'

'Too bad,' said Harford suavely. 'Well, guess you can let us have a room, eh?'

'Sure, stranger.'

'An' some grub an' some rye whisky. An' keep yer mouth shut, see?'

'I see, stranger,' said the man philosophically. 'We gets all sorts here, an' I've never opened me mouth too wide yet as I knows of.'

When the food came, Crosby and Harford fell to with a certain amount of appetite. Then the whisky bottles were opened, and presently Crosby was not taking such a gloomy view of their situation as he had done hitherto. Harford watched him closely, and when he considered that the pilot's

courage was sufficiently bolstered, he removed the bottle and began to talk.

'Where are we goin' to sell this lot of pelts?' he asked.

'Don't ask me, pal,' said Crosby plaintively. 'We got a good haul, didn't we?' Then his face changed. 'Suppose that guy describes us to the Mounties?'

'He won't describe any one any more,' said Harford sardonically.

'You outed him?'

'Sure I did!'

'That's two,' muttered the pilot.

'Two what, you cheap Wop?'

'Two guys you've killed,' muttered Crosby.

'If it was only two!' scoffed Red Harford. 'You poor mutt, I've outed more guys than I can remember. There's nothing to it. They got in my way, and—out they went! See? Take care you don't get in my way, brother.'

'We're pals,' said the pilot hurriedly.

'Then don't go talking out of turn, see? That guy won't talk, so we're safe there.'

'What about the guy who came up in the Bel-lanca?'

'Well, he couldn't see who we were. Talk sense, Crosby! One man looks much the same as another in furs, don't he?'

'I guess you're right.'

'I guess so, too! Now, he didn't come after us, on account of he was tryin' to let the life back into that trapper guy, which life I had conveniently let out. So he backed a loser. He won't be able to

testify against us, any more than any one else. We covered our tracks so far, Crosby, and there just ain't no reason why we shouldn't go right on coverin' 'em.'

'Petrol, pal,' muttered the pilot, and the other man's face darkened.

'One of the things we got to do, brother,' he said slowly, 'is to sell this bus—it's too notorious. Then we'll buy another, with a clean sheet, and start all over.'

'Keep on at this trappin' game?'

'Why not?'

Silence fell in the little room. Harford began to look idly at the page of newspaper in which the chips for their meal had been sent up. A small advertisement caught his eye, and he sat upright, brows drawn together in a frown.

'Know anything about radium, brother?' he asked after he had read the few lines several times.

'Valuable stuff, ain't it?' asked Crosby indifferently.

'You said it! Most valuable stuff in the world, I guess. What if we could get hold of a cargo of radium, sell it in the States, and light out to South America, to spend our declinin' years in comfort?'

'Talk sense, pal,' said Crosby petulantly. 'Where do we get the radium?'

'Here,' said Harford, tossing over the piece of paper. The pilot took it and read the paragraph, which was inviting tenders for radium cartage, and was, in fact, the very advertisement that Crossland had answered some months previously.

'What date is this paper?' asked the pilot, when he had assimilated the information.

'How do I know? What's it matter?'

'It may be old. The thing may be fixed up by now.'

'Then it's up to us to undercut their price! Surely we can do that, seein' as we shall never collect our earnings!'

'What's the idea, then?' asked the pilot in a muddled way.

'I told you—get a load aboard and beat it for the States. There's plenty of guys in little old Chicago that'll buy from me. Now listen, brother. This is serious. What we got to do is to take a little risk. We got to find a rail-head an' plant our pelts aboard, sent to a certain address I know. He'll hold the dollars for me. Then, when we got rid of that little lot, we beat it up fer the radium camp.'

'O.K. by me,' said Crosby.

'I'll go ask the saloon-keeper where the nearest rail-head is,' said Harford, going to the door. 'Put that bit of paper in yer pocket until wanted, brother.'

Next day, Harford having found out all he wanted from the old saloon-keeper, the men set off, and the pelts were duly dispatched to an address in America. Then, refuelling near the station and perforce paying for their petrol, they started for the northern latitudes and the radium camp.

Here they met with an unexpected rebuff. They came down on the lake near the camp, and at once two men shot out from the shore in canoes, just

as they did when Nick landed for the first time. The Bellanca had now a jetty built to her special requirements, but the Stinson was a little low on the water, and could not use it. Thus the occupants had to wait for the men in the canoes.

'What might you be wantin'?' asked the first man, shipping his paddle and gazing calmly up at Harford, who was putting on his most suave expression.

'I want to see the manager, brother. Important business.'

'Is that so? Come aboard an' I'll see what I can do for you,' said the man. Harford and Crosby both entered the canoe, and the man paddled them to the shore and afterwards led them to Mr. Harrison's office. He left them outside while he went in, and in a few moments came out and motioned them to enter.

'You want to see me?' asked the manager brusquely.

'I guess that's right,' said Harford easily. 'It's about the carting of the radium stuff of yours.'

'That contract's been applied for ages ago,' said Mr. Harrison with some irritation.

'Is that so? Too bad!' purred Harford. 'Might I ask who got it?'

'Crossland of Indian Leap, although I don't know what business it is of yours.'

'Oh, I guess I know old Crossland. He puts his prices pretty high, don't he?' suggested Harford cunningly.

'His tender was the lowest of the lot,' said Harrison.

'Is that so? If you wouldn't mind telling me the figure I'd see if we could beat it. Our firm's a pretty big one, and we can sometimes cut prices where the smaller firms can't.'

Harrison stared at him for a moment.

'I guess I'm satisfied as I am,' he said dryly.

'But, mister, that ain't business!' protested Harford, genuinely shocked.

'I don't care what it is,' snapped Mr. Harrison. 'That kid carries out the job in an efficient manner, and the price is a fair one. That's all that matters. Good day to you.'

In vain Harford protested; Harrison had no more to add. Crosby, however, was surprised that his friend did not carry the argument to any great lengths, but retired with a smile and some commonplace remark. Harford did not speak again until they were in the air, and then his words rather startled the pilot.

'We want that contract, and we want the kid's plane,' he said thoughtfully. 'An' what's more, brother—we're goin' to have 'em!'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PLOT SUCCEEDS

To any one unacquainted with the astonishing fitness of men who have spent their lives in the snowy lands of northern Canada, the rapid recovery of Jean Latour would have seemed impossible. He gathered strength daily, and his wound healed firmly and cleanly. In a very short time he was sitting up in bed, demanding food, and when Nick saw him after three days' absence on a prolonged trip into British Columbia, he was amazed at the change that had taken place in the man.

In a very short time the trapper was sitting out in the sun, and after that it was not much of a step to walking down to Mathers's store for a chat. And then came the day when he announced that he was taking his dogs and going north again.

In vain Nick protested that he could not be well enough.

'Not vell enough?' cried Latour cheerily. 'I tell you zat I am vell enough to march to ze North Pole. I, Jean Latour, am as strong as ever. Strong as a horse, maybe. And I sit on ze top of my sledge, and my dogs pull me vherever I vant to go. It is easy—child's play.'

'You'd better let me fly you up to the district you want, and then set off from there,' said Nick. 'For one thing, what are you going to do with a sledge and dogs here in the summer-time?'

'The summer, he vill soon be over,' sighed Latour.

'Yes, but you don't want to sit around here until the snows come, do you?' grinned the boy.

'Of a certainty I do not! I t'ink perhaps your idea is a good one. You vill fly me up zere next time you haf a trip, and I go on from zere, hein?'

So it was arranged, and a few days later Nick packed the sledge and dogs into the Bellanca and flew them with their owner and all his gear up to the forests in the snow lands. Here he dropped Latour at the spot where he had picked him up wounded, and before he flew off again asked him seriously if he had a gun to defend himself with should the thieves attack him again.

'But, Nick, my friend, you talk nonsense!' protested the trapper. 'I haf guns to get myself food, haf I not?'

'Well, don't hesitate to use them if the blighters come anywhere near you again,' said the boy.

'You should tell me zat! Aha, if zey come again zere vill not be enough of zem left to put in a match-box! I, Jean Latour, say it!'

With this assurance Nick had to be content, and flew off, leaving the indomitable trapper waving from beside his sledge. Indian Leap seemed dull at first without the vivid personality of Latour, but life settled down, and there seemed to be more work for the young pilot than ever, for the short summer season would soon be coming to an end, and flying then would be at an end until freeze-up was general and skis took the place of pontoons.

Mathers did not repeat his trip to Edmonton. He proclaimed loudly that the city had disappointed

him, except for the one shop that had really fascinated him, and that was the ten-cent store. He stayed peacefully in or just outside his store and surveyed the world from there. And his gossips with visiting prospectors and trappers were nowadays tinged with a spirit of superiority, for he considered himself a travelled man.

Nick loved the life. He had managed to send several small contributions home, and now learned that Mr. Clayton was reopening the case, having been able to make certain investigations that, he considered, justified such a proceeding. The new case had been laid before the authorities, and was down for hearing in about a month's time.

'I should be easier in my mind if we had another couple of hundred pounds,' wrote Mr. Clayton, 'but although I have tapped every source I'm afraid we just can't get the extra. I don't want you to think, Nick, that I'm saying that justice can be bought. Nothing of the kind. But it costs money to pursue investigations. Men's time has to be paid for. And we could do with every penny we could raise to get that scoundrel Weedon laid by the heels.'

Naturally this letter stuck in Nick's mind, and he could not help his thoughts turning to the reward offered for the capture of the murderer of Sunny Lake. He was as sure in his own mind that Harford and Crosby were the perpetrators of the crime, as that they had been the men who attacked Latour. But proof was lacking, and the whereabouts of the two men were also unknown.

He called in for his usual cargo at the radium camp one day, and was told of the efforts of two men to get the contract away from him. He listened to the description of the men and their plane, and recognized them instantly. But he kept his knowledge to himself, preferring to share it with Trooper Curtis rather than with the manager, who would, after all, never see the men again.

A week after this visit he was flying towards Fort Vermilion, where he had an engagement to pick up a party of men and some pelts. He was flying along merrily when he saw in the distance a column of smoke rising into the air. He altered his course slightly and flew towards it. It was a thick column, more than an ordinary trapper would show from the fire over which he cooked his food. And, as the boy got nearer, it suddenly came in intermittent bursts, making him wonder what was going on.

It occurred to him suddenly that some one might be using the smoke to signal with, for the puffs of smoke were regular. He remembered the Morse code he had learned when younger, and tried to read what the puffs said.

It was clear enough once he arrived at that idea. 'S O S' said the smoke, and Nick set off at increased speed towards the scene of the appeal for help. He soon arrived over it, and could see against the whiteness of the snow two men with a blanket and a fire of damp wood with which they were signalling. They threw away the blanket as he roared overhead, and waved frantically. By their side was a small sledge, overturned.

Nick circled overhead, and then made off in search of a river, or some water on which he could safely come down. He could see that one of the runners of the sledge had broken, and he supposed the men wanted tools to mend it, or even a lift somewhere. He was quite ready to help them, if it was possible, and no thought of treachery crossed his mind.

He could see the gleam of water quite near the scene of the accident, and came down low in order to see if it was a safe landing-place, or whether there were 'dead-heads', or half-submerged logs, just under the water, which would wreck his pontoons. But he found the water clear and not too fast flowing, and made a good landing on it.

He threw out his anchor, then brought his boat out of its locker and inflated it. The men had not yet got to the river-side, and he was ashore and walking towards them before they met. The thought half crossed his mind that they had taken a long time to get from the sledge to the river, but he dismissed it with the reflection that they might be very tired.

They were coming towards him through the almost inevitable belt of spruces, their heads low and their faces much muffled in their furs. Once again a gnawing suspicion crossed Nick's mind. There was something familiar about their appearance, and why were they hiding their faces? He hesitated, and at once things began to happen.

'Stick 'em up!' said a hard voice, and the blue barrel of a small automatic appeared like lightning. Naturally Nick did as he was told without further

ado. He did not intend to argue with shiny guns, for he knew too much about the lawlessness of the bad men of the north to take any chances with them. Also he had recognized the voice of the man who had spoken. It was Red Harford.

'Sure!' he said obligingly, his hands shooting up over his head instantly. 'What's the game? Who are you?'

'Never you mind who we are,' said the man coldly. 'It's lucky for you that you don't know. Now, you do just as you're told, or you'll be as dead as last year's turkey on Thanksgiving Day!'

'O.K., boss,' said Nick.

'Walk right ahead through the trees and keep on walking till I tell you to stop. Don't talk an' don't bring your hands down either. When you get where I want you I'll tie you up, but you won't come to no harm if you do as I say. Got that, brother?'

'Sure,' replied the boy, wondering what was to be the next move.

'Well, turn half-right from where you are, an' keep going. Step on it!'

Nick turned automatically in the direction indicated, and started off across the snow. The path chosen for him kept his back to the river, and he wondered how he was to get to the Bellanca. He could not see the men, for they had closed in behind him as he passed them, and he supposed that they would follow until he reached the spot where they wished him to be.

The snow was not easy to walk on, for it was soft

on top, with a firm crust underneath. Nick began to wonder idly what it was like wearing snow-shoes. Then he realized that his arms were getting very tired of being held aloft, but he remembered Harford's injunction not to bring them down, and also not to talk. He had reached the point of wondering what this command about talking was for, when he heard a sound that caused him to drop his arms and swing round impetuously. It was the sound of the Bellanca's engine starting up.

As Nick stood rooted to the ground, the big aircraft rose from behind the trees and made off northwards. He was alone with a wrecked sledge in a world of snow.

CHAPTER XXVII

ALONE IN THE WILD LANDS

NICK watched the Bellanca out of sight with very mixed feelings. His foremost thought was one of anger, partly at the ease with which he had been tricked, and partly at the unscrupulousness of the men who could leave him thus alone in the snow without means of transport. He stood helplessly watching until the plane was out of sight, and then turned his attention to the wrecked sledge.

It was a small, light sledge, of the kind that one man can easily manage, and one of the runners had snapped and was sticking pathetically up in the air as the thing lay on its side. Shrugging his shoulders philosophically, Nick got going across the snow towards it, for it seemed to him that if he could repair it, he would at least have something to give him shelter. There was also the possibility that there might be food or a weapon on the sledge.

Tramping over the loose snow was tiring, but Nick did not allow himself to think what it was going to be like trying to get back to civilization. He reached the sledge and at once examined the things that were lying on the snow around it. He found two rugs, but no food, gun, or even matches with which to light a fire.

'It's obvious they didn't mean me to get far,' grunted Nick. He set his teeth. 'I'm not going to be done by a rotten pair of crooks!' he said aloud. The sound of his own voice was startling in that stillness, and he began to whistle to keep his spirits

up. Talking to himself sounded too eerie across the snow and among the spruces.

The snapped runner did not seem an insuperable obstacle, and he looked round for something with which to make a splint. He had, of course, his clasp-knife, and he ploughed his way to the spruces to cut a branch that would serve his purpose.

The usual thongs were on the sledge, for fastening whatever there was to be carried on it. Nick took one and fastened his splint on with it. He had to take his gloves off to perform the operation, and when it was finished to his satisfaction the appearance of one of his fingers suggested frost-bite.

At once he put the finger into his mouth and sucked hard. Presently feeling began to come back into it, with an intolerable itching and pins-and-needles. When he was sure that it was all right he put on his gloves again, righted the sledge, packed the two rugs on top of it, and caught up the traces.

He stood and gazed round him once more. Which way had the men come? Which way was the nearest for Indian Leap? He then saw what he had not noticed before, evident signs that the men had camped in that locality for a day or two. He could see now where a tent had stood, and spruce branches spread for a couple of beds. This was away among the trees, quite a little distance from the sledge, and evidently not intended to be seen from the air. Footsteps went in all directions,

until the boy despaired of finding out which way they had come.

However, it occurred to him that only one lot of footprints had the marks of the sledge-runners as well, and this, he felt sure, must be the way they had come. He was now quite convinced that the whole affair was a carefully planned trap, and not the casual seizing of an opportunity on the part of Harford. They must have lain in wait for him. But how did they know that he was coming that way?

Of course—it was on the radium route! At once recollection came to him of what the manager, Mr. Harrison, had said to him when he was last at the radium camp. He had told him of the two men who were after the contract. Now it was clear that they had camped on the loneliest part of the route, waiting until the plane came by, in order to carry out their plan.

Well, there was nothing to do but to follow the trail as far as possible. If there had been no local falls of snow it should be easy enough. Nick placed the traces over his shoulders and started off. The sledge came after him with a jerk, and the great trek had begun.

For an hour the boy plodded on through the soft snow, hauling the light sledge, which ran over the top of the crust easily enough, until he began to wonder how the prospectors who used this mode of transport as the most natural thing ever got anywhere at all. He was feeling very tired when he saw in front of him a line where the snow appeared to be different. It *was* different! Straight

across his field of vision, at right angles to the path he was taking, was a broad pathway, where the snow appeared on a slightly lower level than the rest.

Although the boy did not know it, this was the great trail leading northwards. It was packed hard by the men and dogs that passed that way, however infrequently, and when he got to it Nick knew that the going would be easier.

But there was the problem of which way to go. After a moment's hesitation Nick judged from the position of the sun that the left-hand fork of the trail must lead in a southerly direction, and that way lay Indian Leap. The morning was rapidly approaching afternoon as he set off grimly down the packed trail, and he was very tired. But he had no firing and no food, and did not relish trying to rest under those conditions.

The sun was shining, a dim, red ball, behind the spruces, when he heard the sound of some one approaching along the trail towards him. The soft pad of the dogs' paws, the swish of the runners, and above all a cheery whistle, made him prick up his ears, throw back his shoulders, and put more energy into his hauling. Surely that whistle could only belong to one man—Trooper Curtis!

Round a bend in the trail at a smart trot came the trooper and his sledge. Nick gave a shout, and Curtis called to his dogs to stop. He was pushing on the pole, and immediately threw his weight backwards, bringing the whole thing to a standstill beside the boy. Then, the dogs having

immediately curled up on the ground, he went forward with a look of the most intense astonishment on his face.

'Gosh old hemlock!' he exclaimed. 'If it ain't young Nick! What are you doin' up here, buddy?'

'Taking a walk,' grinned Nick.

'So it seems. Where's the plane? What's the big idea, Nick?'

'The men who set on to Latour set a trap for me, and they've got the bus,' said Nick wearily.

'Is that so?' said Curtis grimly. 'Say, guess I'll make camp for an hour, get some grub, and take your statement. You look all in, buddy. Set down on that sledge. I'll have a fire going in half a minute, and some pork an' beans pipin' hot for you.'

But Nick refused to rest. The trooper, hard as nails as are all of his kind, was sorry for the boy and wished to do what he could for him. He collected wood and built a roaring fire by the side of the trail, and Nick opened a tin with stiff fingers, and presently the appetizing smell of the food told him how hungry he was.

Sitting on a pelt by the side of the fire, Nick thawed out, and his stiff muscles began to feel supple again. When he was warmed and fed Curtis asked for his story, and listened with acute attention to every word of it. This time the boy told everything, even the story that Mr. Harrison had told of the men trying to get his contract.

'So you think that's where they're goin'?' asked Curtis.

'I guess so. I don't think they expected me to get away with this, you know. The place where they left me was all soft snow, and I only found this trail by sheer chance, really. I just happened to see that their sledge had come from the west, so I went that way, feeling it must lead somewhere. And it led to this trail.'

'Sure it did! And mighty lucky it was for you that I happened along to-day. You might not have lived through the night, Nick.'

'I know that.'

'And you're sure it was Harford and Crosby?'

'Dead sure.'

'That's fine! We'll get 'em now for sure.'

'But can you tape them up with the Sunny Lake murder?'

'Fraid not, buddy. No weapon, you see. I don't suppose he carries the thing he hit Black Eagle with around in his pocket, exactly.'

'What sort of a thing do you think he used, Trooper?'

'Well, a spanner, maybe, or the butt end of his gun. But I got to be movin' on, buddy. Let me see what I can let you have. Matches, some tins of pork an' beans, an' some flour for dampers, eh? Anything more?'

'What about a gun?' asked Nick hesitatingly.

'Sure. An' some shells, eh? I got a spare, naturally, an' you can have it. Now, you keep right on down this trail, buddy, an' you'll get somewheres in time. Don't delay too long before makin' a fire an' pipin' down fer the night. Take

it easy an' you ought to be all right. Here's the goods.'

'I suppose you're on a job?' asked Nick wistfully.

'You said it! Get on to Banks as soon as you can. He's round about Indian Leap somewheres, and he's got all the papers about Harford. He knows the case right through. You can trust the corp. I got to get on up to Vermilion. If I get through with the job I'm on, I'll find that radium camp of yours. If I find them guys there I'll hold 'em on suspicion. So long.'

Curtis packed up his sledge and cracked the long whip in the air. The dogs got to their feet and, straining against the traces, waited for the word of command. The trooper went to the ridge pole at the back and, throwing his weight on it, loosened the runners, which had already got stuck to the snow. Then he gave a shout.

'Mush!'

At once the little team of dogs threw themselves against the thongs and, with the trooper pushing and guiding from the rear, the little outfit started up the trail again. Nick waved cheerily and then, feeling thoroughly heartened, shouldered his own leather trace and plodded on southwards.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FRIEND IN NEED

NICK was thoroughly tired by the time darkness fell. Taking heed of the trooper's warning, he did not delay making camp too long, and set about finding the wood for a big fire while it was still twilight. As soon as he had the fire going he opened one of the pork-and-beans tins, and heated it up. When he had eaten the contents and there seemed nothing to do but to sleep, he all at once became aware of the terrific silence closing in on him.

In the dim light the trees stood like grim, silent shapes on the snow. There was not a sound anywhere. No wind to stir the trees and rustle the branches. No animal or bird life to call or threaten. Just great and immense silence, so that the boy wondered with a sudden panic if it was like that to be deaf.

A branch cracked in the fire, sending a shower of sparks everywhere and making a welcome noise. Nick gathered some more wood, partly for morning and partly to make up the fire so that it would burn well into the night. Then he spread the rugs on the sledge, rolled himself up, and closed his eyes.

The next thing that happened was that a long-drawn howl sounded from apparently near at hand. Nick thought of wolves, and every hair on his head stiffened. Then a sharp bark, but this time farther away, challenged the owner of the howl, and a duet ensued. After a moment or two of discomfort, Nick decided that they were only

coyotes, and snuggled down again. He was just deciding that he could not stay awake all night on the off-chance of a wolf coming that way, and making sure that his gun was handy in case one did, when sleep overtook him.

He slept peacefully all night. The fire died down; the stars came out, and their light glittered on the sparkling snow. Wild things came and went, but Nick slept on, awakening at last to a crisp, bright morning and the same peaceful quiet all around.

Feeling a terribly old campaigner, Nick made his fire and tried his hand at dampers. He was quite successful, and, with another tin of beans, made a sustaining breakfast. He decided not to waste time by hunting, for the pot, yet awhile, but to wait until he saw some signs of animal occupation.

Carefully smothering the remains of his fire, he set off again down the trail. Since meeting the trooper, what had been a terrifying experience had turned into a sort of glorified camping holiday. No longer did he feel alone in the world, or have a sense of fear because he did not know with any certainty which way to go for safety; but he felt that he was one with all the lone trappers who managed to sustain life without apparent trouble in the snowy wastes for an indefinite time.

He had been two hours on the road, and his slightly stiff muscles were well run in, when he saw a black dot in the distance, which presently turned out to be Father Benet and his Indian servant and sledge.

The Father was amazed to meet the boy, just as the trooper had been, but he had less time to listen to his story. He inquired if there was anything he could give him, such as coffee, and put quite a collection of odds and ends on the boy's sledge. But he was heading north to the bedside of a dying man, and could not stay; very soon his spare, white-haired form was heading up-trail again, and the boy went on southwards.

Nick began to feel that this trail was almost as crowded as the Brighton road on a Saturday afternoon! He had met two friends already, and he had only been two days on the trail. Trooper Curtis had estimated that it would take him over a week to get back to Indian Leap, and he wondered who would be the next that he would meet.

He was soon to find out. A party of Indians passed him at a slow lope, taking no apparent notice of him whatever. But not very long afterwards he heard violent shouts in a well-known voice, and Jean Latour careered out of a small forest, waving and shouting at the top of his voice.

'Holà! Holà! My young friend Nick. It is I—Jean Latour—who calls. Halt, then, and tell me what comes to you.'

Nick pulled up at once, and watched the little man on his sledge cavorting across the snow at an amazing pace, shouting questions all the time. When presently he drew up alongside he announced that one of the Indians had seen Nick and, meeting Latour not long afterwards, had told him that the young airman was hauling a sledge

along the southward trail. Latour, who was going about his business in his usual leisurely way when in the wilds, turned about and whipped up his dogs to a tremendous speed, sure that all was not well if Nick was on the ground instead of in the air.

Nick told his tale, and the little man listened attentively. When he had finished he laid his hand impressively on the boy's arm.

'Nick, my young friend, it is speed you should make, hein? Those so great scoundrels, your enemies and mine, they should be caught before zey do more damage. And ve must catch zem. Ze great speed now, hein?'

'That's so,' agreed Nick. 'But I'm afraid I can't make much speed, Jean. For one thing, this isn't my game. I'm doing my best, but I can't make half the speed that you would, for instance.'

'But zat is eempossible! It speak for himself! No man can make ze speed I make. I, Jean Latour, am ze speediest man in ze north. But here is where I help you, my young friend. I haf a plan. Trust yourself to me, hein?'

'You bet I will!' said Nick cheerfully. 'Anything you say, Jean.'

'Zen ve stack my pelts on your sledge, and you get on mine. And so ve travel, hein?'

'Will it be safe to leave your pelts here?' asked Nick.

'If ve catch your bad mans, yes. And ve vill catch zem. I haf seen somezings of vich I say nosings yet. Come, help me vith ze pelts.'

Everything was done as Latour demanded, and

the little man placed everything he possessed on Nick's sledge, which they first drew off the trail, and then fastened everything over with a tarpaulin. He placed conspicuously on the top of the heap a bone-handled knife with curious carvings on it. Nick remarked on its strangeness.

'Zat is vhy I leaf him,' said Latour, spreading one of Nick's rugs over his own sledge. 'Come now, get on, and I vill show you some speed. Every one know zat knife. I leaf him zere so zat every one know zat ze sledge an' pelts is mine. No one vill touch zem but your bad mans, and zey ve go to catch. Come wiz me.'

Nick did as he was told and Latour sprang up in front of him and seized the traces.

'Mush! Mush! Mush!' he screamed. 'Holà! Holà! Mush, you leetle brown dogs. Mush, you lazy snails! Mush!'

The sledge careered down the trail, striking off sharply at an angle that nearly threw Nick off his balance. The dogs raced along the new route, which carried them northwards from the trail on which Nick was travelling before. He ventured a question.

'Aren't we going to Indian Leap, Jean?'

'No, no, no, no, no! Indian Leap? Vot for I take you to Indian Leap? My good leetle dogs cannot go zere in ze summer. I take you some- wheres now and show you somesings.'

Nick held his peace for a while, until he saw a shining river looming up in front of them.

'What's this, Jean?' he asked.

'Aha! Somesings zat you do not know, hein? But I, Jean Latour, I can tell you everysings. Zis river, he run into the Peace River after long time. But on ze vay he pass t'rough many little lakes, an' also many rapids. Are you afraid of rapids, Nick?'

'Not if you're not,' grinned the boy. 'Are we going on the river, then?'

'Questions! Nosings but questions! Yes, my young friend, ve are going on ze river. Here soon ve come to ze huts of some friends of mine. Zey take care of ze dogs, and lend me a canoe. And here ve are.'

Raising his voice, he broke into his usual chant of 'Holà! Holà!' and several Indians came out of the huts that were built close up to the river-brink, and waved in a dignified manner that contrasted amusingly with that of the vivacious little French-Canadian.

Latour brought his dogs to a standstill and leaped off the sledge. Next he broke into voluble speech in a tongue that was strange to Nick, but which appeared intelligible to the Indians. Everything seemed to be settled in a moment, and Latour led the way down to the river, followed by Nick, while one of the Indians took the dogs in another direction.

A canoe was brought forward, and Nick, who had some experience of the light little vessels, managed to get in without mishap. Latour seized a paddle, shouted to Nick to paddle on the left-hand side of the canoe, and himself worked it out into mid-stream, where it was caught by the

current and whirled along at a pace that caused Nick to open his eyes very wide.

In an aeroplane speed is not very obvious. In a large freight-carrying plane such as the Bellanca the pilot must watch the air-speed indicator to be sure that he really is travelling at nearly a hundred miles an hour. As there is nothing near at hand with which to compare the pace, it never seems much, and Nick found that in all his flying experience he had never had such an illusion of speed as he had in the canoe that was racing downstream in the grip of the current.

Latour had asked him if he was afraid of rapids and he had answered in the negative. When the distant roar of them began to be audible, and he knew that now there was no turning back, he began to wonder if he had spoken the strict truth! The roar grew louder; the canoe rushed along, and suddenly they were plunging downwards, with eyes blinded with spray, and the canoe leaping and jumping as if tossed by a giant hand.

Nick was badly frightened, but he held on tightly and set his teeth grimly. Not for worlds would he have let Jean Latour know that he was scared. When at last they were in calm water the trapper turned round, his face one wide grin, and waved his paddle jubilantly.

'Good, hein?' he shouted. 'Zat is ze great life! Zose rapids, always I fight zem. Some day zey get me, perhaps, but not yet. I, Jean Latour, I beat zem still.'

The river flowed on, but more slowly, for a

while, and Nick found that he was expected to put his back into the paddling business, or the vigour of Latour's strokes brought the nose of the canoe round towards the bank. Accordingly he worked hard, finding it unexpectedly tiring.

Suddenly he saw that the river broadened out in front of him into a small lake. He could see across the flat country the gleam of water to the right, while the river still flowed on slowly northwards. Latour turned with a broad grin.

'I said I show you somesings,' he said. 'Now you look.'

They swung out of the current and into the lake, propelled by one sweep of Latour's powerful arm. And there, tucked away under a fringe of trees, riding the water as lightly as a seagull, was an aeroplane—a Stinson.

CHAPTER XXIX

NICK ON THE TRAIL

WHEN Nick saw the aeroplane he gave a whoop of joy. He was sure at once that it was the one used by Harford and Crosby, and he was sure that he could now turn the tables on them by flying straight to the radium camp and denouncing them. He and Latour sent the canoe flying over the water towards the craft, and in a very short time they were climbing aboard.

Nick had a look at the pilot's cockpit first, and saw that the flying gear and instruments would present no difficulties. Then he turned to Latour.

'We'll have to have a fire to warm up the oil,' he said. 'They must have drawn it off if they wanted to use the bus again. I guess it will be in a can somewhere.'

'I make ze fire,' said Latour, and went ashore. Nick foraged about in the littered cabin, and soon found a big tin of frozen oil. He had lifted it and was about to carry it out, when something that was lying on the floor behind it caught his attention. He stared at it for a moment, and then, in a queer voice, called to the trapper.

'I say, Jean—can you come here a minute?'

'Sure I come. What is it?' Latour returned to the plane, and all the time Nick stared as if fascinated at the object on the cabin floor.

'Look at that,' he said, pointing, as the trapper entered. 'Don't touch it!' he shouted, as the man went to take it up. 'What is it?'

'A spanner, hein? Why ze mystery, my young friend?'

'What's that on it?'

Latour bent down, taking care not to touch the spanner, his face suddenly grave.

'It has been used to keel somesings, hein? Perhaps an animal for food.'

'Or perhaps Black Eagle at Sunny Lake!' said Nick grimly. Latour sprang to his feet, his eyes dilated with horror.

'You sink zat? Vot do ve do, Nick?'

'We shall have to fly straight down to Indian Leap after all,' said the boy slowly. 'I guess this is the missing weapon that Corporal Banks has been looking for. You see, I know this plane. I've worked on it, fitting new pontoons after that guy Crosby crashed. It's their plane all right.'

'I, too, did t'ink zat it vas ze plane of Harford and Crosby, ze men who keeled me and who tried to leave you to die in ze snow. I did see it here two-three days ago, and ven I see you, an' you tell me your tale, I tink of it and bring you here. Zey haf your plane, and now you haf theirs.'

'I can't think how they could be so careless as to leave that spanner lying there all this time,' said Nick slowly.

'Perhaps it was behind somesings. Zen zey stand ze big tin of oil zere, but it is very foolish.'

'There was a bit of paper there, and when I moved the tin it got caught and came away with it. Perhaps it hid the spanner before,' said Nick.

'Perhaps. Now come and ve boil up zis oil of

yours. Zen ve fly to Indian Leap and see ze good Corporal Banks.

Taking care not to disturb the cabin any more, they got the oil tin out and warmed it up laboriously over the fire. Nick then got to work on the engine. This was a task with which he was very familiar, and in the shortest possible time he announced that he was ready to start.

The canoe was tied to a nearby tree, and there was nothing else to worry about. Nick started his engine, cruised about the lake for a while, and then took off and headed south.

Two and a half hours' flying brought them to Indian Leap, and Nick dropped down neatly by the jetty. Before he had thrown the rope that was to catch on the post to tether the plane, he became aware of tremendous excitement in the town. Crossland was racing out of his shack, a gun in his hand, and Horridge, similarly armed, was doubling up from the hangar. Mathers, in the distance, was shouting and running as fast as his old legs would bring him towards the river, and a sudden 'clip-clop' of hoofs showed that Corporal Banks was not only in the town, but on the war-path as well.

Nick paused with amazement, until the explanation dawned on him. The occupants of the town had seen the Stinson and recognized it for the plane that had caused a good deal of trouble up and down the land. They were determined that this time, anyway, Harford and Crosby should not escape.

Nick leaped on to the jetty and shouted, Latour just behind him. At the sound of the trapper's 'Holà! Holà!' people jumped as if stung, and then Crossland, who was the nearest, let out a howl.

'It ain't them! It's Jean and that young Nick! What's happened, Nick? Where's the Bellanca?'

Corporal Banks on his big horse thundered on to the jetty, his face a study of amazement. He reined up within a few feet of the young pilot and stared at him. He jerked his head towards the Stinson.

'How come?' he barked.

'Listen,' said the boy earnestly. 'Harford and Crosby stole the Bellanca and left me up north somewhere. I met Latour, and he showed me this plane hidden on a lake. It's theirs. And there's something inside it that fixes the Sunny Lake murder on them at last!'

The corporal swung himself down off his horse and strode towards the plane.

'Show me,' he said gruffly.

Jean Latour was eagerly telling the story, with a wealth of detail, to Mathers and Horridge, while Nick led the Mountie into the cabin and pointed to the spanner. Banks went down on one knee and stared at it with narrowed eyes. Then he brought a handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped it up carefully, afterwards looking round him as if for further proofs.

'Got your gloves on?' he asked Nick, without turning round.

'Yes.'

'Keep 'em on, then. And bring me all the tools you can find on this plane. I've got the gear up at the post.'

'I know where you can put your hand on the men now,' volunteered Nick. Banks swung round as if shot.

'You do? Where?'

'Up at the radium camp, I guess. They stole my plane to get my contract. I—I know a lot more if you've got time to listen.'

'Bring the tools up to the post,' said Banks. 'I'll listen there.'

He went off, and Nick did as he was told. When he had found all the tools and movable articles he took them up to the post, where he found the corporal busily comparing a photographed set of finger-prints with those on the spanner, which he had brought into visibility by means of a white powder.

A young Mountie was standing by with a camera, and more photographs were taken of the new prints. Banks then turned his attention to the rest of the tools, and dusted them with the powder, photographed the resulting prints, and at the same time curtly told the boy to get on with his story.

Nick told in detail all that had happened, from the time the manager of the radium camp had described the men who were trying to get his contract to the time he found the spanner in the cabin of the Stinson. Banks listened without comment.

'You can swear this is their plane?'

'Yes. I've worked on it.'

'You could swear to the men if you saw them?'

'I could!' said Nick grimly.

'Plenty of prints on these tools,' commented the corporal after a pause. 'Trouble is, they're all different.'

'Guess you'll find some of mine there,' said Nick quietly. 'Both Horridge and I used their tools as well as our own when we were mending their pontoons for them.'

'Any objection to me takin' your prints?'

'None,' was the smiling reply.

'Get a pad,' said the Mountie curtly to his assistant, and Nick had to press his fingers into an inked pad and afterwards on to a piece of prepared paper. Horridge was called and put through the same performance. Then Banks once more compared the prints he had with those that showed on the tools.

After a while he got up, opened a safe and put all the articles away, and relocked it. Then he took two pairs of handcuffs from a cupboard and put on his Stetson again.

'What about the prints?' asked Nick, disappointed that the corporal was not more communicative.

'All there,' was the reply. 'Yours, Horridge's, Harford's, and a fourth chap's. I guess that's Crosby.'

'I suppose so,' said Nick thoughtfully.

'I shall want you to sign your statement,' went on Banks. He opened a door into an inner room, and for the first time the boy became aware of the

rattle of a typewriter. 'Is that ready?' he asked the unseen occupant.

'Just on, sir,' was the reply.

'I didn't know you took down a statement,' said Nick with great astonishment.

'Trooper Pendelbury took it down,' was the reply. 'Now you got to sign it.'

'Right-o!' agreed Nick.

The trooper brought in two closely typed sheets of paper, and Nick read them through carefully before signing. Then, the formality completed, Banks turned to him.

'Don't you want to fly me up to the radium camp?' he asked.

'I was hoping you'd say that,' said Nick, grinning all over his face. 'Shall we take the Fox Moth or the Stinson?'

'The Stinson,' said the corporal decidedly.

'We'll pick up Curtis on the way. Pendelbury will radio him that we're coming. More room in the Stinson.'

'There is, a bit,' agreed Nick. 'May I bring Horridge along too?'

'What for?'

'To fly the Bellanca back. I guess you won't let Crosby fly you down.'

'You're dern right. O.K., bring Horridge. Let's go.'

Great was Latour's sorrow when he found that he would not make one of the party flying up to the radium camp. Nick was sure of finding the men there, and Banks was very strongly of his

opinion also. But when they got into the Stinson Nick found that the motor had oiled up, and it would not fire. After wrestling with it for twenty minutes he told Banks regretfully that they would have to go in the Fox Moth after all.

As they were changing over into the other plane Trooper Pendelbury came on to the jetty.

'I have to report, sir, that Trooper Curtis has left Vermilion, and cannot be located,' he said.

'Just as well,' grunted Banks. 'We couldn't get him into this wagon. O.K., Pendelbury.'

Making sure that fuel and everything was all right, Nick took off in the Fox Moth and headed northwards. He was wildly excited. They were about to make an end of the career of violence that had for the whole summer disturbed the cheerful, placid life of the north.

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE RADIUM CAMP

It had all seemed ridiculously easy to Harford, and even the timid Crosby was heartened by the ease with which they had obtained possession of the Bellanca. He had inquired once what would happen when Nick reached civilization again, and at first Harford's only answer was a laugh.

'What makes you think he'll get there?' he asked.

'If he keeps on long enough I suppose he will,' said Crosby unthinkingly.

'Yeah? An' how long d'you suppose he'll have to keep on before he gets there?' he gibed.

'Matter of a week or thereabouts,' was the reply. 'I guess we'll be well out of the country by then, though.'

'And how is he to get on without food or fire for a week?' asked Harford with an ugly chuckle. There was a long pause.

'You mean he'll starve?' asked the pilot waveringly.

'Sure! If he doesn't die of cold first.'

'He saved my life once,' muttered Crosby.

'Well, he won't get the chance of saving it again,' said Red Harford indifferently. 'Not turnin' yeller, are you, brother?'

'I wish that kid didn't have to be bumped off,' said Crosby with feeble doggedness.

'Is that so? Well, listen to me, brother! I guess I could just about fly this old crate myself, seeing

as I've sat beside you for so long and watched you. So don't fancy yourself indispensable. I can get rid of you just as easily as I got rid of the kid, or the Indian, or any other guy who ever got in my way. So don't forget yerself, brother!'

'O.K., pal,' muttered the pilot. There was silence for a time, and then Harford began again.

'He won't die of cold,' he said with a sudden ejaculation. 'I left those two rugs on the sledge. Guess that's just too bad! Now I guess there's the chance that he might run into a gang of Indians or trappers an' get away with it.'

'What do we do then?' quavered Crosby.

'Nothin', brother. Keep on with our plan. Even if he did, he couldn't get to the radium camp as soon as we shall. Just you keep on flyin', and everything will be oke.'

Crosby recovered his spirits as they neared the camp. He came down on the water, taxied up to the little landing-stage, and the two of them were ashore before the two men who usually put off in canoes to meet Nick were aware of what was going on.

Mr. Hetherington was walking along the bank and saw the plane come down, and went to the manager's office to tell him that Nick had come, for he recognized the Bellanca. Both men were surprised that the boy should have chosen a day almost a week early to call for his cargo, but they were more surprised still when Harford and Crosby walked into the office.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Harrison,' said Harford

suavely. 'We're engaged to fly for Crossland now in the place of young what's'isname. Our plane is outside, and we're ready to load up just as soon as you like.'

'That's Nick's plane,' said Mr. Hetherington sharply.

'No, sir—it's Crossland's,' said Crosby quickly.

'Where's the boy?' continued the missionary.

'Well, sir, it's most unfortunate, an' I hate to tell you, but he's had an accident. That poor kid will never fly again,' said Harford with regret in his voice.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Harrison.

'Too bad,' agreed Red Harford.

'What happened?' asked Mr. Hetherington in a troubled voice.

'He went out in that little plane of his,' put in Crosby, who was quite an intelligent liar when he felt that the occasion demanded it. He knew that he could tell a better tale in this instance than Harford, for he had both seen and flown in the Fox Moth. Harford stood silent, listening for a cue.

'In the thing he called a Fox Moth?' inquired the missionary.

'You said it! An' he never came back. Crossland called us in to look for him, an' we toted a Mountie along, but all we found was the burned-out wreck of the plane.'

'Poor lad! Oh, poor lad!' said Mr. Hetherington.

'You said it! So Crossland offered us the job. Said we'd better take on at once as he didn't want you held up.'

'But you're a week early,' objected Mr. Harrison.

Harford did not change colour, but he had received a blow. It had not occurred to him that the carting of the radium would necessarily be done at certain times and on certain days.

'I don't know nothin' about that,' he said stolidly. 'I guess Crossland was so upset at losin' the kid—he was fond of him, ye know—and forgot which week it was. But I suppose you can let us have a fill-up? It'll be a wasted journey else.'

'Yes, I suppose I can—to-morrow,' said the manager testily.

'Not to-night, brother?'

'No, not to-night! You guys don't understand radium. My men will have to load it in for you, and they're all in the workings. Now, just get along and get Cooky to fix you up, will you? He'll show you where to sleep to-night and so on. Good evening, boys. I'm busy.'

He turned determinedly to his papers, and after a moment's hesitation Red Harford went out, followed by Crosby. For a few moments after their departure nothing was said, and then Mr. Hetherington turned to the manager.

'I don't like those men,' he said forcibly.

'Neither do I,' was the absent-minded response.

'But listen, Mr. Harrison. I feel sure that they are crooks. I am sure that if that dear lad is indeed dead, they have done him some injury.'

'That's rather a big accusation to make,' said Harrison, looking up from his papers with a worried frown.

'I know it, but somehow I feel that they are bad men, and I am sure that even in an emergency Crossland, dear fellow, would not employ crooks for his business. He is such a fine, honest man. And, my dear brother, there is no emergency! Surely Martin Crossland could have got hold of a pilot within a week, from Edmonton or some other big aerodrome. All this troubles me very exceedingly.'

'It's queer,' said Harrison slowly. 'I'm going down to have a look at the aeroplane. Are you sure it's Crossland's plane?'

'I know very little about the things,' said the missionary with a smile, 'but nevertheless I am convinced that it is Crossland's aeroplane. I do not at the moment remember what he called it. But let us go down and inspect it by all means.'

A somewhat strange friendship had sprung up between the manager and the missionary. Mr. Hetherington was very well pleased with the way his little services were attended by the rough men in the camp, and had made it his temporary headquarters. Several times he had been away for a week or so at a time, visiting tiny settlements and outlying villages, but always he returned to the camp, his heart warmed by the welcome he received there.

At first Mr. Harrison had regarded him as something of a nuisance, with his bell-ringing and so on, but he had learned to respect the portly missionary, who was yet for all his bulk as hard as nails and as ready for a trip into the wildest of country as the

toughest miner in his employment. When he found that the men liked and respected Mr. Hetherington he realized that he, too, found something to like and respect in him. And a friendship begun rather suspiciously, perhaps, had now ripened thoroughly, although there was very little outward show about it.

The two men went down to the river-side and looked at the Bellanca, sitting out at the end of the jetty. It appeared very peaceful and inoffensive, and presently Mr. Harrison suggested that they should go along and look into the cabin. They were just doing so when they heard a hail, and saw Harford running down towards them.

'Hi! What the heck!' he began. 'Then he slowed up. 'Why, Mr. Harrison, I didn't know it was you,' he said. 'I thought it was some of the boys snoopin' around. This plane is in my charge, an' I don't want any harm to come to it while I can stop it.'

'Quite right,' said Mr. Harrison. 'I don't think we're likely to do it any harm, though.'

'Certainly not,' said Harford with a smile that was intended to be pleasant. 'Want to look it over?'

'I've seen all I want, thanks,' said the manager, and he and Mr. Hetherington returned to the office. Harford at once got into the cabin of the Bellanca and looked round to see if any incriminating article had been left in it. It was quite empty, however, but the man left with an uneasy feeling that all was not well, although he could not see how

anything could have gone wrong with his precious plan.

Meanwhile, a good many miles away from the radium camp a dog-team was panting through the snow, with a Mountie leaning on the ridge-pole. He was feeling very exhausted as he dragged his feet along the trail. The dogs were comparatively fresh, for Curtis had changed his team several times on the journey. When one team of dogs became so tired that they were not putting up the speed he desired, he changed them at the nearest post or settlement and carried on. He had come to the conclusion that he ought to look in at the radium camp and arrest Harford and Crosby.

But no man can run through the snow for thirty-six hours on end, and that was what Curtis had set himself to do. He knew that if he could keep up his best pace for the rest of the day after meeting Nick, through that night and part of the next day, he would reach the radium camp. And he was strongly of the opinion that it was his duty to do so. He was sure that the man Harford, who had left Nick to die in the snow, was a murderer already, and Trooper Curtis knew very well that murderers were his game. Setting his teeth, he had pushed on at an alarming speed to Vermilion, discharged his business there, and set off again with a new team ever northwards towards the radium camp.

That night Red Harford and Crosby went to bed in a big hut, as near as they could get to a big stove. They slept well, for Cooky had fed them

excellently, and they had nothing on their minds. The plan looked as if it was going to work. The next day the plane would be filled with all the radium concentrates that it would hold, and then they would make all speed to the United States, sell their freight, and cross the border into Mexico or drop down into South America. It all seemed absurdly easy. While selling the radium Red Harford could pick up the money that was due to him for the pelts he had sent down by rail. No one would dare to try to do him out of his money, for his name was potent in the underworld of crime. The future looked very rosy for Red Harford and Flier Crosby as they settled down to sleep in the big hut.

At the same time Nick, on top of his sledge, was listening to the barking of coyotes and wondering if a howl that he had heard could possibly be that of a wolf. Things did not look quite so rosy for Nick, but he got to sleep just the same.

Mr. Hetherington and Mr. Harrison, their problem still unsolved, took longer to get into the land of dreams. Both men were sure that there was something wrong about the two new arrivals, but they did not know how to prove it without wasting a good deal of time. Mr. Hetherington thought more about Nick's supposed death, and Mr. Harrison just a little more about his contract and his precious radium, but both of them were awake for a longish time, and uneasy dreams pursued them when at last they fell asleep.

But in the depths of the spruce forest, over the

blanket of snow, a team of dogs trotted on, while the Mountie lay at full length along the top of the sledge, not asleep but guiding the dogs as he rested his weary limbs. Being a kindly and thoughtful man, he did not rest for long at a time, but soon rolled off the sledge, forced his stiffened legs to work, and pushed hard on the ridge-pole, making the going easier for the dogs and quicker.

As he struggled along, sometimes swaying with weariness, he occasionally wondered if he would ever get to the radium camp, and also if Nick would get safely back to Indian Leap. But it was too cold, and he was too weary to think much. He did not whistle now. The only sounds that could be heard in the sparkling starlight were the swish of the runners and the Mountie's snow-shoes, and the soft pad of the dogs' paws on the packed snow trail.

CHAPTER XXXI

'I WANT YOU, HARFORD!'

NEXT morning both Harford and Crosby woke late, and went out to find most of the men gone to the workings. Two, however, were stacking the little sacks of radium in a long wall-like pile, and when the new arrivals came out of the hut they asked by what time they wanted the packing done.

'I want my breakfast first,' growled Harford. He went into the kitchen, and asked Cooky brusquely what he had for them to eat. The black man eyed them unfavourably.

'Well, sah, I done give out all de grub, and de boys done eat 'em all. But I guess I can find you somepin, sah,' he added as a nasty look came into Harford's eye.

'You'd better, brother! You'd better,' said Harford menacingly. 'I don't stand no nonsense from black trash. Get some good grub, fer we've got a long run ahead of us.'

'Suttinly, sah,' said Cooky, messing about with his pans. Presently there was some food for the two men, and they sat down to it eagerly.

The work of loading up the plane began as soon as they had finished their meal. Red Harford did not offer to help the men, but stood aside and watched them. It was not that he knew the injurious effects of radium when it is handled without the proper precautions, but simply that manual work did not appeal to him, and he never did any if any one else could be found to do it.

It was nearly midday when the men finished and told Harford that he must sign the receipt form in Mr. Harrison's office before he flew off. The man looked into the cabin of the plane and laughed.

'Aw, shucks! Who d'you think I am?' he asked derisively. 'I want a proper cargo, not a few silly sacks like that. Fill her up, you guys.'

'It's heavy stuff,' said one of the men, leaning against a post and prepared to argue.

'I know all about that. Fill her up!'

'This is the cargo the kid used to take,' said the other man obstinately.

'Is that so? Well, I'm not a kid,' sneered Harford.

'He said a bigger load wasn't safe.'

'See here, brother, I'm not interested in what that kid said! He's dead, see? I want a man-size cargo, and I'll get the manager to give me the say-so.'

'O.K., if you do that,' said the man.

Harford went fuming down to the manager's office, and found Harrison talking to Mr. Hetherington. He stormed in and announced that the men refused to give him a decent load, and that he could take twice the amount they had put in.

Harrison was surprised, but eventually signed an order for more sacks to be put in. Harford went back, satisfied, and told Crosby to get on with the business of warming up the oil and so on, so that they could take off as soon as the loading was complete.

The manager and the missionary presently walked down to the jetty with the receipt for Harford to sign. With a slight grin he signed the name of Crosby, and then went forward to get into the cabin while Crosby started up the engine.

Just before it spluttered into life Mr. Hetherington lifted his head with a puzzled expression and listened. Then the Wright Cyclone engine fired and the sound that had attracted the missionary was drowned. As the Bellanca moved off into the middle of the stream, however, Mr. Harrison turned to his companion.

'What was it you heard just now?' he asked.

'I must be getting old and foolish, my dear fellow,' said the missionary apologetically, 'but I thought I heard the little aeroplane belonging to that dear young fellow, Nick Lester.'

'But he's dead,' said the manager slowly.

'Yes—yes. But that looks remarkably like his little aeroplane coming over the trees just now!' And Mr. Hetherington pointed southwards.

'Gosh old hemlock! It *is* another aeroplane, anyway!' shouted the manager. 'Hi! Stop those men there! There's something fishy going on.'

The Bellanca was tearing up-stream, warming the engine, and neither Crosby nor Harford heard the command to stop. But Harford saw the excitement, and also noted the direction in which the men were staring. He glanced southwards and his eyes narrowed.

'Look left, brother,' he said coldly.

'Eh? What's that?' Crosby looked, and his

face went ashen white. 'That's the kid's Fox Moth,' he said huskily. 'We're done for.'

'Are we?' Harford gritted his teeth. 'Can't you get off?'

'No.' Crosby pulled the stick back hard, but there was no reaction. 'There's no lift, or our load is too heavy. I can't make it, pal.'

'You got to make it! Open her out some more.'

'I can't. She's full out.'

'Turn an' try down-stream. You *got* to get off, brother! If you're right, an' the kid's in that plane, it's the finish for us! Get that into your thick skull. Now, what about it?'

Crosby turned and opened the throttle to its fullest extent. The plane tore down-stream, but still there was no lift, and the pilot, perspiration streaming down his face, stood up and leaned on the control column in his effort to get the desired lift from the elevators.

'That guy's comin' in.' Four times the Bellanca had raced up and down the river, but without getting off the water at all. Now Harford saw that the Fox Moth was in her landing glide, and likely to be down in a very short time.

'I can't do nothin', pal.'

'See he don't get down, then. Get in his way, see? Zigzag across the river so's he can't put down. Maybe we can get off if we have a little time.'

Nick could see the frantic efforts of the Bellanca to get off the water, and Corporal Banks was tremendously interested, for if Crosby managed it, it was possible that he would lose his man for ever.

He shouted through the speaking-tube to Nick, telling him to put down at once, and the pilot pushed forward the stick slightly and closed his throttle.

But as he dived for the water he suddenly saw the big Bellanca flash across in front of him, so that a crash seemed inevitable. Nick knew that if the Fox Moth hit the big plane it would simply crumple up, and, acting on impulse, he sideslipped quickly so that the Bellanca passed underneath with a few feet to spare, while he landed lightly on the water at the far side of the river.

He saw the freight plane turn as he opened his throttle and taxied for the jetty. The Bellanca roared down on them, but Nick kept cool, only speeding up a little, for he was a good judge of distances, and knew that he was not now in any danger.

One last attempt still failed to bring the big aircraft off the water, and then there was a sudden end to the affair. Columns of smoke came from the overheated engine, and Crosby switched off hurriedly before the thing should burst into flames.

Meanwhile Nick and his passengers were getting ashore on the jetty, while the manager and Mr. Hetherington, almost stupefied at the things that were happening, rushed forward to greet them. But before any explanations could be gone into, the keen-eyed Mountie saw the Bellanca edge to the farther shore, and two forms leap out, grasp branches, and pull themselves away from the river.



Trooper Curtis, leaning heavily against his sledge, swaying with weariness, but with his pistol-hand as steady as a rock

'We can do that,' said Nick abruptly. 'Come on, Corp!'

Corporal Banks got obediently back into the plane again, and Nick, hastily starting up his engine, taxied across to the far side, where they let the plane go and sprang ashore in the same way that the crooks had done.

They could just see two figures dodging in and out of the trees, and Banks drew his automatic and ran in pursuit. But they had not gone far before they heard the sound of a shot and one of the figures pitched to the ground. The other threw his hands up, and Nick and Corporal Banks, putting on all speed, came upon a curious scene.

Harford was sitting up on the snow, with a hand to his shoulder as they approached, and Crosby was standing, with his hands still in the air, not far from him.

'I want you, Harford!' exclaimed the Mountie, levelling his gun.

'Pardon me, Corp., but he's my prisoner,' said a mild voice, and Nick gave a cry of joy as he recognized Trooper Curtis, leaning heavily against his sledge, swaying with weariness, but with his pistol-hand as steady as a rock.

'Sure! Sure!' said Banks with a smile. 'I'll just put the bracelets on him an' we'll get along. Let's have your wrists, Crosby. Thanks. And you, Harford.'

Red Harford's shoulder had to be bound up, for he was bleeding fast from a wound made by Trooper Curtis's bullet when he failed to stop

when called upon. Then he and Curtis sat on the sledge and the dogs hauled them to the edge of the river, with Nick and Banks pushing on the ridge-pole and Crosby trailing along miserably beside them.

Meanwhile at least thirty canoes had put off from the other side of the stream, and most of the men from the workings, realizing that something quite out of the ordinary was going on, were paddling across for dear life to see what it was all about. Mr. Hetherington was in one canoe with Cooky and his own Indian companion, and Mr. Harrison was in another, both equally anxious to be in at the final scene, and hoping that the crooks would not get away. When they met the little procession near the bank of the river, and realized that the Mounties had got their men as usual, cheers went up, and there was a scene of great jubilation.

There was a great deal of tiresome work to be done still, and it was up to Nick and Horridge to do it. Trooper Curtis was told to get some sleep, after Cooky had personally paddled him back and taken him to his kitchen for food. And Corporal Banks had to attend properly to his prisoner's wound and then see that they were both secured until the aeroplanes should be ready for use again.

Poor Nick felt hopeless at first when the cheering crowd followed the Mounties and their prisoners, and he and Horridge stood on the jetty and viewed the river. The *Bellanca* was stuck in the mud of the bank, and the *Fox Moth* had drifted downstream on her own. Horridge was muttering to

himself, and the sound restored the boy's sense of humour, and he laughed heartily.

'Come along, Horridge,' he said. 'Let's find some rope. Then we must chase down in a canoe and collect the Fox Moth. We can use her to tow the Bellanca across the stream.'

'O.K., if you say so,' said Horridge morosely. He found a length of rope, and they got into a canoe and began to paddle towards the Fox Moth. It did not take them long to catch up with the aircraft, for the stream was a slow-flowing one. As soon as they got aboard Nick started up and they taxied to where the Bellanca was still forlornly sitting.

It took them some time to get the plane off the mud-bank, but when once they had the big freight-carrier back against the jetty, they found that the damage to the structure was not excessive. Then Horridge got to work on the motor, and announced that he would want several new parts before the Wright Cyclone engine could be got to go again.

It was presently arranged that Corporal Banks and his two prisoners were to go back with Nick in the Fox Moth. He would then pick up the spares that Horridge needed and fly back with them. Meanwhile the radium had to be unloaded from the Bellanca, so that she sat lightly on her floats while the repairing work went on. When everything was ready Horridge would fly Curtis back in the Fox Moth, and Nick would bring the usual cargo down in the Bellanca, afterwards meeting the others at Indian Leap.

Everything was done according to plan on the following day. The prisoners, moody and furious, with the charge of murder against Harford and of being an accessory against Crosby, were taken down to Edmonton and lodged in the city jail. Then Nick flew Corporal Banks back to Indian Leap and stopped to pick up the spares, and incidentally to tell Crossland and Mathers the exciting end to the story.

Banks sat listening as Nick told his tale, but when it was quite finished, and all the questions had been answered, he had one of his own to ask.

'What you goin' to do with the thousand-dollar reward, kid?' he asked with a kindly smile. 'It'll be along any day now.'

CHAPTER XXXII

PARTNERS

Two months later Indian Leap was in the grip of winter again, and all flying north was suspended until the rivers had settled down under their roof of ice, and pontoons everywhere had been replaced by skis.

The mail train was in, and Nick was sitting in Martin Crossland's shack, reading a batch of letters, while Martin himself was studying a somewhat legal-looking document with very puzzled eyes. Presently he folded it up and looked across at the boy.

'What's the news, Nick?' he asked kindly.

The boy looked up with shining eyes.

'The money got there just in time, Martin,' he said with a slight catch in his voice. 'I don't quite understand it all, but they got the case reopened and some experts on the job, and they found that Weedon had been falsifying the books for ages, and then he bolted to France, and they've let Dad go with the King's Pardon.'

'What's he want the pardon for if he didn't do it?' demanded Mathers, who had poked his head in at the door in time to hear the last bit. 'But wait a bit, you guys, while I get the others. They're all in town, and they'd all love to hear this. Hang on, will you?'

'Sure,' grinned Nick, and Mathers disappeared. They heard his stentorian voice bellowing for various folks to come and hear about 'Nick's Pop'. Soon Trooper Curtis and Corporal Banks saun-

tered over, the trooper once again whistling, and then Father Benet and Mr. Hetherington hurried in, with Mathers bringing up the rear.

Nick was about to begin his letter again, when a bellow outside sent them all flocking out again, and Jean Latour careered into the town, behind his usual team of fine, healthy dogs.

'Holà! Holà! It is I, Jean Latour. And how is my old friend Crossland and my young friend Nick? Eh? I come.' He threw himself in his usual impetuous way off the sledge and rushed forward. 'I hear zey get vot ze judge give zem, hein?' he added cheerfully.

'Yes, that case is over,' said Crossland gravely.

'Zen I gif t'ree candles to St. Anthony, hein, Father?' He fell on his knees momentarily in front of Father Benet, who touched his head gently with his hand.

'Come now and be quiet, my son,' said the Father with a smile. 'Nick is about to read us something of much greater interest than the fate of villains.'

'I come—at once I come. And so quiet as a mouse—as two mice. I, Jean Latour, vill not speak anozzer word. Hein?'

'It would be magnificent,' said the Father, smilingly, and they all laughed as they trooped back into the shack.

It barely held them all, but when the door was closed, and Mathers sat on the floor with his back against it, it was all very cosy. Every one looked at Nick, and he flushed and began.

'I've just had a letter from Dad,' he said. 'They

got a lot of new evidence, and now he's got the King's Pardon and is free.'

'But, shucks, what for do they want to pardon an innocent man?' asked Reuben Mathers in perplexity.

'I guess it's just their way of putting it,' said Nick, turning to Mr. Hetherington questioningly.

'That's so, my dear fellow. It's just one of the silly ways the law has of putting things. If a man's been in prison or a woman either, you understand, and they find the dear fellow is not guilty after all, they give him the King's Pardon—or her, as the case may be—you understand.'

'But that's not all,' continued Nick, grinning happily. 'He's coming out here to see me! Isn't that grand? And he's bringing my sister too. Anyway, they're going to Moose Jaw to stay with Uncle Nicholas, and they're coming up here to have a look at me.'

'Why, that's grand,' said Crossland with his drawl rather more accentuated than usual. 'Now read this, an' tell me if you can make any sense outa it, for I can't. I told the lawyer chap I wanted a perfectly simple deed of partnership an' that's what he's sent me!'

'Partnership?' Nick opened the formidable document and waded through its complicated sentences with unbelieving eyes. 'Do you mean me?' he finished lamely, seeing his name in very large letters on the first page.

'You're dern right, I do!' said Crossland heartily.

'But—but I've no money to put in the concern,' stammered the boy, his eyes bright and eager.

'You've got that dern old Fox Moth of yours, and your own good grit,' said Crossland, more gruffly than ever. 'I'm satisfied if you are.'

'Satisfied?' Nick stood up, and nearly fell over Curtis and Jean Latour in his effort to grasp the outstretched hand. 'Satisfied? Why, you dern old Injun! Satisfied? It's the thing I'd rather have than anything else in the world!'

'Well, I guess you better put your name here, an' I put mine here, and the boys can sprinkle theirs all over to be witnesses, eh?' grinned the big man. The business was rapidly completed, and hands were shaken all round, some of the men insisting that Crossland was a lucky man to have a live wire in his dern old concern at last; and others saying that Nick was the lucky one, for a blind beggar could twist old Martin, and he would soon have made his fortune!

Amid this cheerful scene a sound penetrated which caused them all suddenly to listen and finally to run outside. An aeroplane was coming over, and soon it was obvious that it was going to land. It was a big Douglas DC2 air liner, and Indian Leap had never seen anything quite so imposing on its aerodrome before. When it put down, and four passengers got out, Nick gave a howl and rushed forward.

'Dad!'

Mortimer Lester, looking paler and thinner than when his son last saw him, saw a bronzed youngster, lean and tough-looking, with blue eyes that matched his own for steadiness. He laughed.

'What about Cambridge now, son?'

'Aw, shucks! You don't want me to go there now, do you, Dad?' was the dismayed reply. 'Why, I can't!' he said triumphantly, as the memory of the little scene just enacted came back to him. 'I'm a partner in the business!'

Mortimer Lester laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

'A partner, eh?' he said, glancing round at the circle of faces, and liking what he saw. 'Well, I was only joking, son. If you've gone all Canadian I rather fancy I'll have to do the same. But haven't you a word for your sister and uncle?'

'Lou—why, you've grown!' Nick exclaimed with brotherly candour.

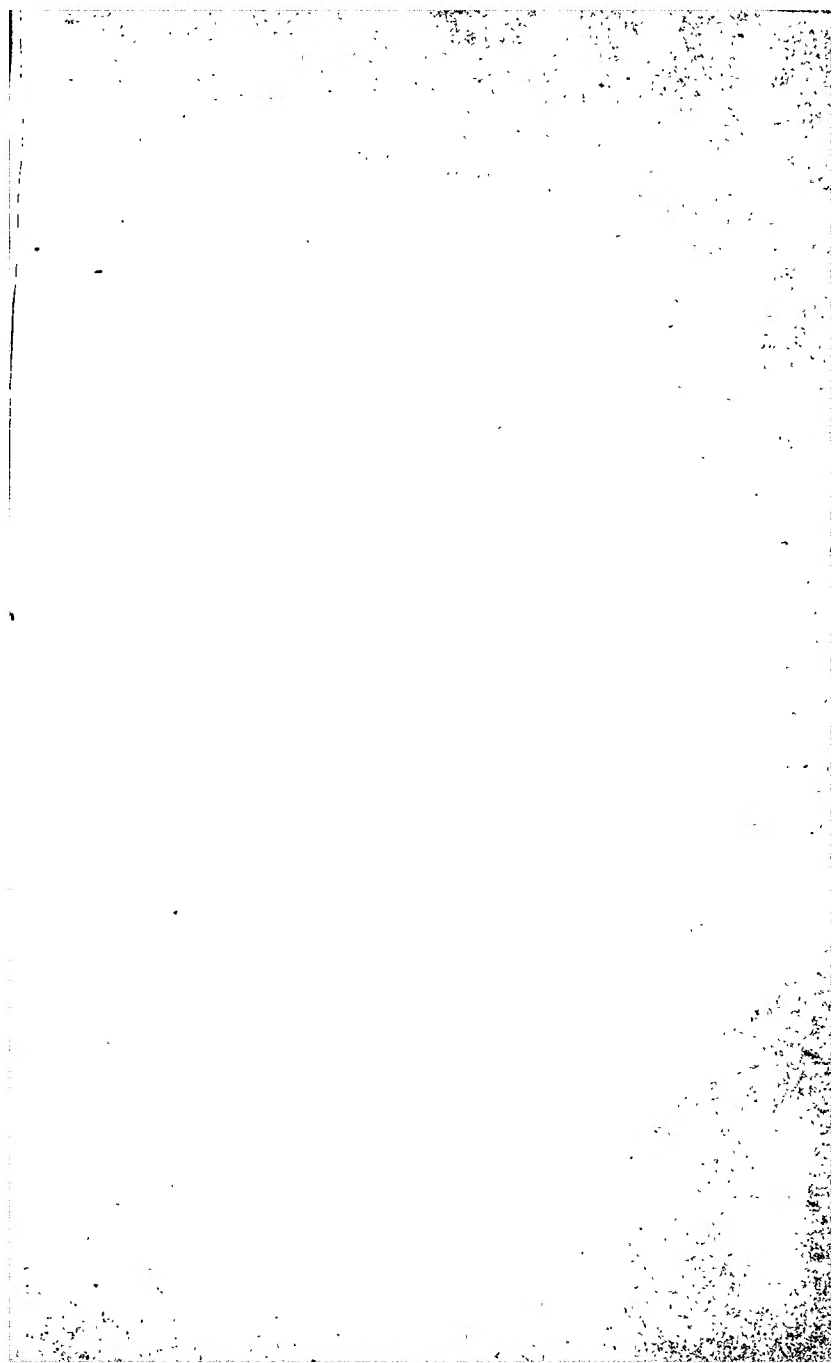
'So have you,' was the reply, given with an affectionate smile. 'I say—I like this place.'

'My dear boy!' Uncle Nicholas, in the background for far too long, now pushed himself forward. 'Accept my congratulations! You have done marvellously. A partner, eh? Who else is in the concern? What's your capital, eh?'

Nick laughed.

'Come along in, folks,' he said, linking arms with his father on one side, and with Martin Crossland on the other. 'Come and get warm and meet the boys. What's our capital, Uncle? Two aeroplanes, and some hope!'

'And all the grit in the world,' said Martin Crossland quietly. 'Welcome to our shack, folks. *Ours*, eh, partner?'



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